

Criticism in News and Its Effects on Authoritarian Duration in China

By

Dan Chen

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Political Science and the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy.

---

Chairperson John Kennedy

---

Mark Joslyn

---

Robert Rohrschneider

---

Jiso Yoon

---

Scott Reinardy

Date Defended: April 14, 2014

The Dissertation Committee for Dan Chen  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Criticism in News and Its Effects on Authoritarian Duration in China

---

Chairperson John Kennedy

Date approved: April 22, 2014

## Abstract

This study explains the varying levels of criticism in news coverage in China and tests the news effects on public opinion. It proposes a revision to the traditional censorship paradigm—fractured censorship system. It finds that in authoritarian China, censorship on the news media is not monolithic. Nor is it entirely decided by ideology. In fact, censorship is a locus where negotiations among political and business powers occur. Specifically, the potentially diverging interests between the central and local governments, the strong commercial interests of news organizations, and the aspirations of certain journalists may constitute fractures in the censorship system that allow sporadic criticism on local governments and officials. Fractured censorship does *not* mean fault lines. The fundamental characteristic of China's censorship system remains to be its swift and effective intervention over news content.

While fractured censorship helps us understand the news production process, once critical news is published or broadcasted, how does such news affect public opinion, if at all? What are the implications of such fractured censorship for authoritarian duration in China? Through two field experiments conducted in east and central China, this study finds that critical news does not necessarily undermine public evaluation of the regime. In fact, critical news may blow off the steam of public anger over contentious social and political issues that emerged during China's economic and political development process, which helps consolidate, rather than undermine, the authoritarian rule.

## Table of Contents

Abstract

List of Figures

List of Tables

Introduction

Chapter 1 The News Media as a Political Actor in Authoritarian China.....1

Part I News Production: Fractured Censorship

Chapter 2 Political Fracture: Monitoring Local Officials, Establishing Personal Authority.....28

Chapter 3 Market Fracture: Market Competition Among News Organizations.....51

Chapter 4 Journalistic Fracture: Aspirational News Professionals.....89

Part II News Effects: Limited Influence on Public Opinion

Chapter 5 Limited Effects of Critical News on Public Opinion.....116

Conclusion

Chapter 6 State-Controlled Media and Authoritarian Duration.....148

Appendix: Sources and Research Methods.....163

Bibliography.....168

## List of Figures

|                 |     |
|-----------------|-----|
| Figure 3.1..... | 55  |
| Figure 3.2..... | 56  |
| Figure 3.3..... | 58  |
| Figure 3.4..... | 59  |
| Figure 3.5..... | 60  |
| Figure 3.6..... | 71  |
| Figure 3.7..... | 73  |
| Figure 5.1..... | 130 |
| Figure 5.2..... | 131 |
| Figure 5.3..... | 137 |
| Figure 5.4..... | 138 |
| Figure 6.1..... | 149 |
| Figure 6.2..... | 155 |
| Figure 7.1..... | 164 |

## **List of Tables**

|                |     |
|----------------|-----|
| Table 4.1..... | 110 |
| Table 4.2..... | 112 |
| Table 4.3..... | 113 |
| Table 4.4..... | 114 |
| Table 5.1..... | 128 |
| Table 5.2..... | 129 |
| Table 5.3..... | 134 |
| Table 5.4..... | 136 |
| Table 5.5..... | 139 |
| Table 5.6..... | 139 |
| Table 5.7..... | 140 |
| Table 5.8..... | 140 |
| Table 5.9..... | 141 |

## **Chapter 1 The News Media as a Political Actor in Authoritarian China**

Control over the news media characterizes Chinese authoritarianism. An important manifestation of such control is the lack of criticism on the regime, including governments and officials at central and local levels. After the economic reform initiated in the late 1970s, the Chinese media experienced marketization that consists of deregulation, commercialization, and partial privatization (Stockmann 2013). As a result, the media market, that is, audience and readers, has become an important factor in the news production process. The receded state control does not mean, however, that the state is losing control. The media now have to satisfy both the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the market. The two forces often pull media content in different directions, creating a dilemma for media practitioners (Brady 2008; Stockmann 2013; Zhao 1998, 2008). Consequently, Chinese media remain tightly controlled by the CCP. The increased but still limited reporting freedom in the news media actually contributes to, rather than undermines, the authoritarian rule in China (Stockmann 2013).

While this study comes to a similar conclusion that the news media in China helps consolidate the authoritarian rule, it challenges both the perception of the lack of political criticism in authoritarian China and the understanding that political and market forces drive news content in different directions. Focusing on varying levels of criticism in news, this study finds that the diverging interests of the central and local governments, the commercial interests of news organizations, and journalistic aspirations constitute fractures in the censorship system that allow sporadic political criticism at local levels. The diverging political interests of central and local governments can sometimes drive news in a critical direction, consistent with the direction

of market competition. However, such criticism tends to stay at the local level, and the censorship system remains effective.

This study also finds that such critical news has limited effects on public opinion. Specifically, while it can lead the public to be more dissatisfied with local governments on contentious issues, it does not undermine the public's confidence in the government's capability to ultimately solve difficult social issues. In other words, it blows off the steam of public anger without compromising the overall legitimacy of the CCP. Therefore, the fractured censorship system contributes to, rather than undermine, the authoritarian rule in China. Next, this chapter reviews the literature of authoritarian politics and the media, introduces the research questions, discusses the mixed-methods approach used in this study, and concludes with an overview of the remaining chapters.

\*\*\*

News media has long been entangled with authoritarian politics (e.g. Farrell 2012; Garnham 2000; Lee 1990; Lerner and Schramm 1967; Pye 1963; Randall 1998; Skidmore 1993). In many authoritarian regimes, the opening of the economic system, that is, increasing market competition and receding state control, is not accompanied by the loosening of media control, at least not to the same extent. In Vietnam, despite the promotion of an open economy, surveillance and imprisonment of critical journalists prevail (CPJ 2012). In Russia, reports critical of the regime can lead to assassinations of journalists (The Economist 2006; 2009). In China, the situation of press freedom is among the worst in the world.<sup>1</sup> The recent incident of censors modifying an editorial that a liberal newspaper *Southern Weekend* prepared to publish resulted in public gatherings in support of media freedom in January of 2013. The lack of press freedom is

---

<sup>1</sup> Reporters Without Borders ranks China at 174 out of 179 countries and regions in the world in the *Press Freedom Index 2011-2012*.



seen as a defining characteristic of authoritarian regimes and thus has been broadly reported by foreign media especially from democracies. In most authoritarian regimes media are state-controlled. In the journalistic discourse, the state-controlled media may help propagate news and commentary praising the regime; minimize the spread of news and commentary critical of the regime; and sometimes help mobilize the public for political campaigns launched by the regime. While journalists seem to have reached converging views that perceive the state-controlled media as tools of authoritarian regimes, scholars have probed this topic through the lens of authoritarian politics and have reached different, if not opposite, understandings. What is the political role of the news media in the functioning of authoritarian regimes?

After the end of the Cold War, the political role of the media in authoritarian societies has attracted much scholarly attention (e.g. Chan and Lee 1991; Price et al. 2002). Within the discipline of political science, democratization scholars have pointed out that access to alternative information may be an essential enabling factor in regime transition through eroding regime legitimacy that aids collective action and the emergence of an independent public sphere (Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Fox 1988; Huntington 1996; Randall 1993; Rawnsley and Rawnsley 1998a; Rozumilowicz 2002; Skidmore 1993). Even during the height of the Cold War, modernization theorists have already argued that media may play a facilitating role in destabilizing authoritarian regimes and creating a sociocultural atmosphere that is conducive to democracy (Lerner 1964). Evidence supporting such arguments has been found in Poland (Millard 1998), Taiwan (Rawnsley and Rawnsley 1998b), Mexico (Lawson 2002), the Muslim world (Howard 2010), and many other countries that have undergone regime change (Fox 1988; Teorell 2010). However, media can also be part of authoritarian control (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Stockmann 2013; Brady 2008; 2012). For example, Stockmann (2011) finds that

the Chinese state is proactively using television advertisements to promote propaganda messages. White et al. (2005) find that in Russia the regime resists challenge to its authority through manipulating the media, especially television. Of course, there are cross-national variations in the ability and willingness of authoritarian states to restrict press freedom (Egorov et al. 2009; Norris and Inglehart 2009). How can we understand and reconcile the mixed evidence on the political role of the news media and the seemingly contradictory theoretical explanations in the existing literature?

I argue that the very assumption behind the contradictory evidence and theoretical explanations should be evaluated. One of the most fundamental problems with this way of framing and understanding state-controlled media in authoritarian regimes is that many scholars treat the media as either facilitating or inhibiting democratic transition. Democratization thus is the fundamental framework where scholars situate the media in authoritarian regimes. This is problematic. In 1999, Geddes (1999) proposes a typology of authoritarian regimes in order to help us better understand the enormous variations in how authoritarian regimes break down and transit to democracies. While Geddes (1999) brings authoritarianism to the dialogue, thirteen years later, Art (2012) takes a step further and argues that we should treat authoritarianism as it is, instead of a transitional regime type. In other words, instead of studying “authoritarian survival,” we should focus more on “authoritarian duration.” While normatively scholars have every reason to study democratic political systems so that democracies can function better, authoritarianism nonetheless deserves full scholarly attention, as understanding how authoritarian regimes endure provides insights on how we can better think about and design political systems.

While the call for scholarly attention on authoritarianism is recent, Art (2012) points out that since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a group of scholars have already started to

take authoritarian regimes seriously and gained real traction on the question of durability. A representative work in this strain, for example, is symbolically titled “Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization” (Brownlee 2007), which signals the transition of focus in the scholarship from democratization to authoritarianism. According to Art (2012), this group of works located the reasons for authoritarian stability or breakdown in “longstanding patterns of behavior, both formal and informal,” (Art 2012, 352) rather than merely pointing to exogenous shocks. So the central question in the study of authoritarianism has shifted from “what contributes to authoritarian break down and the ensuing democratic transitions” to “what contributes to authoritarian duration.”

Three works specifically on China represent the most recent efforts at understanding authoritarian duration from within. Pointing at different mechanisms, these works show how social protests (Chen 2012), commercialized media (Stockmann 2013), and social organizations (Hildebrandt 2013) actually help consolidate, rather than erode, the authoritarian rule in China. Following this burgeoning group of research on mechanisms that sustain authoritarian rule (Bueno de Mesquita and Downs 2005; Brownlee 2007; Tsai 2007), I examine authoritarianism through explaining varying levels of criticism in news content and the effects on public opinion. Instead of asking whether the media facilitate or inhibit political liberalization, I situate the production and effects of news that criticizes local governments in the grand scheme of authoritarian duration. In this way, this study examines the political role of the state-controlled media in China.

There are a number of actors involved in the news production process. They include state institutions, both formal and informal (government agencies, laws and regulations, government officials), news organizations, journalists, and citizens. The central puzzle, however, is that the

Chinese media outlets all operate within the same political environment, and they are all subject to authoritarian media control. If so, then why does the level of criticism, i.e., quantity and intensity, in the news content vary? Moreover, how does such news criticism affect public opinion on key social issues?

\*\*\*

Overall, the importance of this study is twofold: the contribution to the theoretical development of authoritarianism, and the empirical implications for press freedom. First, by examining political institutions of media control this study may advance our understandings of authoritarian institutions in general and the complicated processes of authoritarian news production in particular. As Geddes (1999) points out, there is much to be learned about authoritarian institutions, a premise for better understandings of democratization. Slater (2003, 81) echoes with a similar observation that while “democratic institutions have long enjoyed pride of place in comparative politics...authoritarian institutions remain inadequately conceptualized, theorized, and investigated.” Given this gap, current theoretical disagreements on whether media facilitates or obstructs democratization underlines the importance of the media in authoritarian regimes. Indeed, the press “reflects the system of social control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted.” (Siebert et al. 1956, 2) Focusing on authoritarianism as a framework to approach the political role of state-controlled media, China is a critical case because of its highly sophisticated institutions of media control (Bradsher 2012) and the broad impact of its lack of press freedom (Gerring 2008). The findings on Chinese institutions of media control will further shed light on media control mechanisms in other authoritarian regimes, such as Vietnam and Russia. Therefore, through investigating the state-media-public relations, we can gain better understandings of authoritarianism, specifically on

whether, and to what extent, the media is part of authoritarian control. These findings will then constitute a premise for better understandings of the role of the media in democratization.

Second, the main object of inquiry in this study—news that criticizes local governments and policies—has generated significant social impact in the Chinese society (Liu et al. 2007; Zhu 2005). For example, a stylized type of television news shows referred to by scholars as “television life news,”<sup>2</sup> not only is famous for its often critical reporting, but also has the potential to set the agenda of what people think about (Cohen 1963; McCombs and Shaw 1972), or even influence and shape public opinions on specific issues (Liu et al. 2007; Tang and Iyengar 2012), as its consistently high ratings and advertising revenues<sup>3</sup> imply. Thus, for policy-makers and interested public, to understand what decides the news content and the effects of such critical news on public opinion is vital to understand the political and social consequences of critical news in China. This study can also provide information for international and domestic activists, civil society groups, and non-governmental organizations promoting press freedom and the value of information for a free society.

\*\*\*

If we observe what news stories about China make to the headlines of American mainstream media outlets, we would find that especially since the 2000s, different ways of media control that are absent in democracies have caught many American journalists’ attention and amazed the public in advanced industrial democracies. Scholars and acute observers have pointed out that China is not only practicing sophisticated methods of media control, but also

---

<sup>2</sup> There has not been an agreed-upon translation of this term. While Chinese scholars have agreed to use *minsheng xinwen* (民生新闻) to refer to this type of news programs, there have been several English translations seen in scholarly works, such as “livelihood news” (Yang 2010) and “citizen news” (Miao 2011). In this project, I will use “life news” as the English translation of *minsheng xinwen*.

<sup>3</sup> For example, shortly after the initial launch of *Just in Nanjing*, a pioneer life news show aired on Jiangsu Television Station City Channel, the ratings rose considerably to 9.2% between January and April 2003 (Miao 2011, 103). In July 2004, the average rating of *Just in Nanjing* was 8.3%, with the highest rating of the month being 17.7% (Wang 2011).

pressuring foreign media outlets to censor reports that are deemed by the Chinese party-state<sup>4</sup> as sensitive (Cook 2013) as well as exporting techniques of media control to other authoritarian regimes such as Zimbabwe and Iran (Eades 2014; ZBC 2013). As scholars and the general public know more about the Chinese way of producing news, the general consensus seems to be that censorship is a major paradigm to make sense of news production in China. Censorship in China is unfortunately effective and monolithic. Moreover, censorship has been generally viewed as a black box that needs to be unpacked in order to understand how news is suppressed and released in China.

While censorship constitutes an important aspect of media control, when we examine the actual content of news, we would find that criticisms on local governments and policies actually exist quite extensively in Chinese media discourse. Moreover, the quantity and intensity of such criticisms vary across news outlets and time. For example, *Southern Weekend* among newspapers, *Just in Nanjing* among television news shows, and 163.com among online news portals are well known among the public, journalists, and scholars for their frequently critical tone towards governments and policies, yet not so much for other news outlets. How can we explain such variations? How do such variations affect public opinion, if at all? Building on the traditional paradigm of censorship, this study proposes a revised paradigm I refer to as “fractured censorship.” However, it is helpful to first examine the traditional paradigm of censorship and its application to the China case.

Censorship marks authoritarian rule across the world. “Free media are an anathema for any dictator.” (Egorov et al. 2009, 645) How censorship helps, if we hypothesize so,

---

<sup>4</sup> Party-state is a core feature of the Leninist notion of communist party and its regime. According to the notion of Leninist party-state, “a highly hierarchical and centralized single elitist party is completely intertwined with the state, with an array of party organizational structures that supplement state institutions from the top right down to bottom, forming a set of party-state apparatus and replacing to a large extent the governmental functions.” (Guo 2012, 25) Therefore, in this study I use “party-state” to refer to the political regime in China.

authoritarian duration can be understood through the framework of legitimacy. For any political regime, legitimacy is an important concern as it is the basis of political rule and effective governance (Lipset 1959). Conceptually, legitimacy can be defined as “the belief of citizens that the nature and functioning of national state institutions conform to their own basic political and moral values.” (Chen 2005, 4; Easton 1965; Lipset 1959; Muller and Jukam 1977) Therefore, legitimacy is a relational term that can be seen as a reflection of the appropriateness and lawfulness of the regime in the minds of the citizens (Nathan 2003). One of the most direct ways to ensure political legitimacy is free and fair elections for political leaders—the minimal definition of democracy. This is also among the most visible differences between nondemocratic and democratic regimes, even though “illiberal democracies” where elections are held but civil liberties are still infringed upon are on the rise (Zakaria 1997). However, this is not to say that nondemocratic regimes have no legitimacy. In fact, in many authoritarian regimes, the support for political leadership is higher than that of democracies. In China, 92.7% of respondents from a nationally representative sample said they trust the national government, according to the 2007 World Values Survey. In contrast, merely 38.6% of American respondents in the same survey said they trust the national government. Of course, we cannot ignore the problem of validity for surveys conducted in authoritarian contexts (e.g. Havel 1978; Scott 1985). Still, especially in sophisticated authoritarian regimes like China, the support for the regime exists. The question is how much.

In order to maintain a reasonable level of legitimacy and support, authoritarian regimes have to use various means. To actively influence citizens’ perceptions of the regime naturally grants the primary role of media control in authoritarian regimes. Indeed, “one of the chief ways used by the (Chinese) regime to forge supportive sentiment is to control information flow.”

(Chen and Shi 2001, 87) There are at least two mechanisms based on which censorship as a major form of media control helps sustain authoritarian rule. First, censorship may limit “citizens’ ability to overcome coordination problems in organizing a revolt.” (Egorov et al. 2009, 645; Shirk 2011, 5) Bueno de Mesquita and Downs (2005) point out that “coordination goods” such as free press can pose a serious threat for authoritarian regimes to survive, because they can reduce the costs of strategic coordination central to the formation of powerful opposition. This is also what King et al. (2013) refer to as “collective action potential.”

Second, censorship may help suppress dissent, such as the expression that “finds fault with elements of the Chinese state, its policies, or its leaders,” (King et al. 2013, 2) so as to create a public opinion environment where the regime is glorified to win public support. Besides censorship, distributing economic benefits (e.g. Stokes 2005; Hicken 2006) and reducing economic inequality (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003) can also help create such a favorable environment for authoritarian regimes. Indeed, “In spite of their dictatorial qualities, the rulers in Peking do not govern the nation solely by naked force.” (Yu 1964, 3) As a recent example, the Chinese party-state introduced a self-censorship program among the journalists, through which to indoctrinate them with the Marxist views of journalism and order them not to take stances in support of Japan on contentious historical and territorial disputes (McDonnell 2013). Through this censorship, the party-state tries to create a public opinion environment where nationalistic sentiments are fueled, a likely result of which being increased support for the regime. Another recent example involves an incident of oil pipeline blast that happened in a coastal city of Qingdao, Shandong province. According to Freedom House (2013), the party-state has tried to restrict media coverage of the explosion on November 22, 2013 that killed over 50 people and injured more. Specifically, a leaked instruction from the



Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on November 24 “strictly prohibited media from dispatching reporters to the site of the disaster, discussing the possible cause and responsible parties, or publishing summaries of past accidents.” This represents efforts by the party-state to minimize the negative effects from accidents like this, which may involve official negligence or wrongdoings. The two mechanisms of censorship thus can reduce the cost of authoritarian control because they reduce the probability of threatening protests and other forms of political challenge.

For the CCP, censorship in particular and media control in general are also indispensable parts of the Leninist party-state framework, according to which “the party seeks to indoctrinate its members as well as the citizens under its rule with its political ideology, and uses or modifies its political ideology according to concrete or changing circumstances to justify its political leadership and political action.” (Guo 2012, 24) As early as 1902, Lenin pointed out in *What Is to Be Done?* that “A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and collective agitator but also a collective organizer.” (Lenin 1963-70, vol. 5, 10-11) Lenin also practiced such idea of media control in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1917 when he declared that “all bourgeois newspapers be shut down.” (Fu 1996, 144) Similarly, in the People’s Republic of China the party-state took over control and monopolized areas such as education, newspapers, magazines, television and radio broadcasting, and social science research, all of which “were regarded as tools of political indoctrination under the jurisdiction of the party’s Department of Propaganda.” (Fu 1996, 144) Similar to other types of authoritarian regimes, persuasion and indoctrination are major purposes of such media control.

\*\*\*

However, the examination of the purposes and mechanisms of censorship does not sufficiently explain why we see *varying* levels of criticism in news content. If censorship is vitally important to authoritarian duration because it can influence public opinion and prevent collective action, why is there criticism at all, and more importantly, why does the quantity and intensity of such criticism vary? Is it because the Chinese party-state is losing control over the media, or is it because criticism is intentionally allowed by the party-state? So far, there is little sign that the party-state is losing control over the media. In fact, the method of media control is evolving. For example, according to *The New York Times*, “China maintains the world’s most extensive and sophisticated system for Internet censorship.” (Bradsher 2012). On the other hand, if the party-state intentionally allows media criticism, how may such criticism benefit authoritarian rule? While existing literature has described and explained the importance of censorship for authoritarian regimes and how it works, it did not pay much attention to the possibility of and situations where censorship may not work as well as it is supposed to.

This study proposes a revision to the traditional censorship paradigm, which I refer to as “fractured censorship.” I find that in authoritarian China, censorship on the news media is not monolithic. Nor is it entirely decided by ideology. In fact, censorship is a locus where negotiations among political and business powers occur. Specifically, the potentially diverging interests between the central and local governments, the strong commercial interests of news organizations, and the aspirations of certain journalists may constitute fractures in the censorship system that lead to varying levels of criticism in news content. It is important to stress that fractured censorship does *not* mean fault lines. The fundamental characteristic of China’s censorship system remains to be its swift and effective intervention over news content through a variety of methods that range from soft methods such as issuing directives and phone calls to

editors at news organizations, to harsh methods such as demoting editors and detaining journalists. My main argument here is that, based on the generally effective and mostly predictable censorship system, it is important to realize that under certain circumstances, this censorship system can have fissures and cracks that allow sporadic criticisms on local issues. Some of these criticisms serve distinct interest of the central and local governments, thus they can be understood as being embedded in the political institutions; some of these criticisms are unintentional results of media commercialization. As will be discussed in the following chapters, these fractures are results of (1) central-local power negotiations, (2) media market competition, and (3) journalistic aspirations.

Such findings also challenge the existing research that seems to have reached the consensus that the Communist politics and the market forces have been pulling the media in different directions. Media professionals, be they journalists or film directors, struggle to maintain a balance between the two forces, as they have to make profits, while at the same time maintain the traditional role of the media as the mouthpiece for the party-state (He and Chen 1998; He 1997; 2000; Lee 1994, 2000; Zhao 1998). This is dubbed as a “tug-of-war” (He 1997). I argue that the political and economic forces do *not* always pull the media content in different directions. In fact, the central-local relations embedded in the Chinese political system, specifically local noncompliance, may under certain circumstances lead to criticism at local levels in news content. In such situations, the political forces coincide with the market forces in driving news towards a more critical direction.

While fractured censorship helps us understand the news production process, once critical news is published or broadcast, how does such news affect public opinion, if at all? What are the implications of such fractured censorship for authoritarian duration in China? For those fractures

intentionally allowed by the regime, criticism in news may help release steam of public anger over key social issues such as corruption. Over the summer and fall of 2013, I conducted two field experiments on media effects in Yangzhou in eastern China and Xi'an in central China using a contentious issue of demolition and relocation. The results suggest less media effects than we would expect based on previous research on media effects in democratic contexts, such as agenda-setting and priming effects. Specifically, while series of studies confirmed that reading newspapers and watching television may set the agenda of what the public think about as well as how to think about important issues in democracies (e.g. McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987), contrary to this, in the Xi'an experiment being exposed to negative news does not change participants' opinions on the issue of demolition and relocation. In the Yangzhou experiment, although the experimental results suggest agenda-setting and priming effects, watching negative news does not undermine public confidence in the government's capability to ultimately solve the issue. This implies that critical news on key social issues does not necessarily undermine public evaluation of the regime. In fact, critical news may blow off the steam of public anger over contentious issues that emerged during China's economic and political development process, which may consolidate, rather than undermine, the authoritarian rule.

Recent studies echo with such findings. King et al. (2013) find that the party-state actually does not delete all criticism in cyberspace, as generally expected. Instead, the Chinese party-state tends to delete the online comments that intend to incite collective action. This type of incomplete censorship has been explained by the safety valve argument. Specifically, the central leadership of the Chinese party-state has been using *local* criticisms to release the steam of public anger over contentious social issues such as corruption and income inequality. While

reaffirming the good intention of the central leadership at solving all kinds of political and social problems, the central leadership's allowing criticisms on local governments is believed to function as a safety valve to maintain the legitimacy of the central leadership, even though this may come at the expense of public evaluations of the local governments (e.g. Hassid 2012; King et al. 2013). The results from this study further confirm the safety valve argument by providing experimental results that criticism in news does not necessarily undermine regime legitimacy.

More importantly, the results from Xi'an experiment suggest the importance of non-media factors in attitudinal change. As implied by the literature of "two-step flow" (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Katz 1957), discussing politics with family and friends may be an important factor as family and friends can function as opinion leaders affecting individual attitudes. Based on the experimental results, I find that the more participants discuss politics with family and friends, the less democratic but more politically efficacious they tend to be. Other non-media factors such as participants' own experience with the issue of demolition and relocation tend to increase their perceived importance of the issue. Therefore, the experimental results on the actual effects of the critical news that is intentionally allowed by the party-state reaffirm the conceptualization of fractured censorship, which does not mean fault lines. It would also be appropriate to understand fractured censorship as the party-state injecting the right amount of criticism into public discourse as a way to release tension on controversial political and social issues, without sacrificing legitimacy of the central leadership.

Therefore, this study treats the news media as a political actor in authoritarian China. Cook (1998) develops a theoretical framework that treats the news media in the United States as a political institution. His framework is derived from the American media experience, and is premised upon the perceived strong media power in American politics. In contrast, in

authoritarian China, the news media should be understood primarily based upon the fact that they are strictly controlled by the party-state. This leads to the understanding of the nature of the Chinese news media that they are much more restricted in almost every aspect of news production than their American counterparts. As Zhao (2000) observes, even the most critical sphere of the Chinese news media, the investigative reporters are, at best, “watchdogs on party leashes.” Of course, at the same time we cannot ignore the independent influence, no matter how limited, of journalists and news organizations in affecting public opinions. The news media are “a producer of meaning, a creator of social consciousness.” (Hallin 1985, 141) Despite the visible differences between the Chinese and American news media, they share an important similarity, that is, the political nature. I conceptualize the Chinese news media as a political actor in authoritarian China. The “political” aspects of the Chinese news media are threefold: (1) the news media continue to perform the traditional role of mouth-piece, as defined in communist politics, helping sustaining regime legitimacy; (2) the news media are used by the central government to boost legitimacy at the expense of the popularity of local officials; (3) the news media are used by aspirational journalists to push for more space for criticism.

Modernization theory suggests that political criticism may be a sign of opening political discourse and receding authoritarian control, as socioeconomic development will eventually produce a middle class that demands more political rights. The political criticism discussed in this study, however, is not equal to the criticism suggested in the modernization theory or the criticism we see in western democracies. The political criticism in the Chinese media discourse is a result of an agenda-building process involving the CCP, the media, and the journalists. Only when the CCP allow certain political criticisms can the news media pursue and publish or broadcast these political criticisms. The CCP’s tolerance of criticism certainly has a strict limit.

In this sense, the criticisms are not real criticisms that we see in democracies. They are results of the negotiations between political and business powers.

\*\*\*

In order to answer the research questions, this study employs a mixed-methods approach consisting of semi-structured interviews, direct observation, content analysis, a survey, and field experiments. The sources and the research methods are discussed in Chapter 2.

The reasons for using the mixed methods approach are twofold. First, the qualitative analysis is essential for acquiring in-depth understandings of the interactive influence of the state, the news organizations, and the journalists on news content, which remains understudied. The partially inductive nature of this study requires thorough analysis through qualitative data that is better at exploring complex issues (NSF 2005). Moreover, the politically sensitive nature of the topic of media freedom in China demands a meticulous investigation of the news production processes through direct observation. Anonymity of the interviewees and other ethical issues will be strictly and properly addressed (Wilson 1993). Finally, the qualitative analysis can help better interpret the results from the quantitative analysis.

Second, quantitative analysis, especially field experiments, is ideal for quantifying and testing the hypotheses of media effects on public opinion in more precise terms (Krippendorff 2004). Quantitative analysis is also useful at cross-examining the findings from qualitative analysis on media effects and expanding the applicability of the results (Brannen 2005; Bryman 2006).

\*\*\*

This study is comprised of two parts. In the first part, I explain why we see varying levels of criticism in news content through introducing the concept of “fractured censorship.” Focusing

on the news production process, the first part discusses three specific types of fractures. In Chapter 2, I discuss the first type of fracture that is rooted in the political institutions of the Chinese party-state. The Chinese party-state is not a unitary actor. As discussed earlier, the assumption of a monolithic authoritarian regime impedes our understandings of how the Chinese party-state works and its relationship with other societal actors (Chen 2012; O'Brien 1996; O'Brien and Li 2006; Perry 1994). In fact, the central government uses a complex system to supervise and regulate personnel and administrative affairs at the local levels. However, local noncompliance has persisted. For example, since the economic reform initiated in the late 1970s, the central government has recurrently sought to control excessive taxation by local governments. According to relevant laws, rural taxes should not exceed 5 percent of farm income. By 1990, however, taxes averaged 10 percent of farm income, with some localities reportedly levying taxes up to 20-40 percent of farm income (Wedeman 2001). Therefore, there have been power negotiations between central and local governments. While the center wants compliance, the local governments want more autonomy. Negotiation here refers to informal ways used by government to achieve a certain goal, such as incomplete execution of central policies and various forms of corruption.

Based on the assumption of multilevel governments, local news reporting can be seen as a way for the central government to shift parts of the burden of monitoring local officials to the local news media. In this way, the local news media can be seen as agents for the principal of the central government. Therefore, the central government would tolerate a certain degree of criticism in news on local issues as long as it sees such criticism as favorable for discovering local problems and improving local governance (Brady 2008; Egorov et al. 2009; Shirk 2011; Tong 2010). This is not a new argument. Many scholars have used the framework of central-



local relations and local noncompliance to explain a variety of problems, such as the increasing numbers of social protests in China (Chen 2012) and local public goods provision in rural China (Tsai 2007). Lorentzen (2012) develops a formal model in which an authoritarian regimes balance media openness with regime censorship in order to minimize local corruption while maintaining regime stability.

Another purpose is that through exposing local officials' wrongdoings, the central government can establish the image of "central good, local bad," so that the public can attribute whatever problems they see to local officials, instead of the central government. Serving as a kind of safety valve for the expression of popular resentment in a relatively harmless way, such critical news program encourages ordinary people to assume that the top leadership is on their side, because the real troublemakers are at the local levels. Lorentzen (2010) described these tactics as "deliberate incomplete press censorship." This type of fracture is, therefore, known to the party-state and is intentionally allowed by it in order to maintain the authoritarian rule. I will use in-depth case studies based on semi-structured interviews and secondary sources to demonstrate the arguments above.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the second type of fracture in the censorship system that can be attributed to the media reforms, specifically the commercial interests of news organizations. Before the media reforms in the 1980s, almost all the media organizations in China received complete state funding and were under strict state control. After the media reforms, state funding reduced substantially, and media organizations now have to rely on advertising and other revenues to maintain operation (Chan and Qiu 2002; De Burgh 2003; Esarey 2005; Shirk 2011; Volland 2012). For television stations, the instant success of life news shows, as their

consistently high ratings show, clearly demonstrates *a* model of profitable news production<sup>5</sup>. As a result, news organizations may have commercial interests in increasing the level of criticism on local issues. Based on the qualitative data, there are several ways editors and producers use to push for more space for critical reporting. First, television producers may use “follow-up reports” to balance the negative content in the initial report. In the follow-up reports usually aired on the following day of the initial critical reports, correction by relevant government agencies and officials or problems being successfully resolved would be emphasized. In other words, the follow-up reports generally end with a positive tone. Through this type of informal negotiation with government officials, television producers can get away with further intrusion or even cancellation of news reports by government officials.

Second, television producers and newspaper editors may choose to report negative news at lower administrative levels or in other administrative jurisdictions. For both newspapers and television stations, they are affiliated with and managed by particular government branches, thus they have administrative ranks similar to those of governments. This creates an unequal status between news organizations at higher administrative levels such as provincial and municipal levels and governments and officials at lower levels such as district and township levels. This may lead to more difficult situations for local governments to negotiate with news organizations at higher levels on the issue of critical reports. On the other hand, reporting on negative stories in other jurisdictions, usually in other provinces, may also make it easier for news organizations to publish or broadcast such stories, because news organizations are less bound by governments and officials in other jurisdictions.

---

<sup>5</sup> To be clear, Chinese television news programs can resort to other measures to increase ratings, such as “vulgar” news stories involving sex and violence (Chen and Han 2007). The point here is that criticism is one way, among others, to increase ratings. My interview with the producer of a popular life news show in the summer of 2012 supports this argument.

Third, television producers and newspaper editors may choose to report on the negative news that is already widely discussed online, especially on Chinese social media sites. Employing the theory of agenda-setting from journalism studies, new media in China, such as online social media and blogs, can set the agenda of traditional mainstream media such as newspapers (Hassid 2008) and television. My interviews with television directors, producers, and newspaper editors reveal that such situation is entirely possible and in fact widespread. Moreover, from time to time journalists can actually make use of the social media<sup>6</sup>, especially Sina Weibo<sup>7</sup>, to push for critical reporting of local issues. In particular, television journalists can report the popular topics discussed online that may have negative implications for local governments, because they can defend themselves by arguing that these topics have already been discussed on the Internet, should they face questions from higher authorities. This is also an important way for television media to capture and reflect public opinion that government officials increasingly care about (Shirk 2011).

Finally, website executives may bribe middle-level censors to guarantee lighter punishment should any of their reports be deemed as crossing the line. As mentioned earlier, critical news has broad audience bases. Commercial online news portals have great incentives to attract online readers. For some of them, publishing critical reports and commentary thus has become a major business model. Under such circumstances, as my in-depth interview with a senior online news portal editor reveals, top executives at those websites may bribe middle-level censors, usually at propaganda departments or Internet management office at the municipality

---

<sup>6</sup> *The Economist* claims that “One of the greatest achievements of the Hu era has been the creation, through social media, of the next best thing to a free press,” and that “Chinese microbloggers relentlessly expose injustices and attack official wrongdoing and high-handedness.” See *The Economist* (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Sina Weibo is China’s biggest microblog service launched in 2009, according to *The Economist* (2012). A recent working paper by King et al. (2013) examines China’s online censorship by analyzing data from a number of social media websites, including Sina Weibo.

level and in the form of gift cards, to ensure punishment at lesser extent, should there be any critical reports that are deemed inappropriate. Normally, punishment for such critical reports can be fine, retracting reports, removing editors, or closing down the websites all at once. Therefore, there is, obviously, great variation among these different forms of punishment. If the punishment could be fines instead of retracting reports, for example, then the boundary of critical reporting is actually pushed back, a result of which is more space for critical reporting, at least for the time being.

In Chapter 4, I profile three news professionals, two television producers and one newspaper editor, whom I interviewed during the fieldwork. These news professionals constitute the third type of fracture. They work for newspapers and television stations, and they are at the middle ranks, in charge of news production for a news show at a television station or the investigative report department of a newspaper. I argue that the position of news professionals in a news organization is an important factor deciding whether they can push for more critical reporting. News professionals at the middle level have the most potential, if they hold liberal ideals of news production. They have more say over news content than entry-level journalists, and they have less responsibility than the top leaders in a news organization. I will also discuss the results from a small survey I conducted among the journalists at Changchun television station in northeast China in the summer of 2013.

Journalistic aspiration is another key factor contributing to critical reporting. Western journalistic values may push television news shows and liberal newspapers in the direction of higher levels of criticism. Starting from the 1990s, it has become evident that some journalists try to fulfill the liberal notion of professional autonomy, such as independence from political and business influence and objectivity of factual information (Tong 2011; Zhou Y. 2000).

Journalistic values have become increasingly important at affecting the content of reports and commentary (Hassid 2011), as reflected in the rise of investigative journalism both in newspaper and on television in China (Tong 2011; Zhou Y. 2000). The rise of investigative journalism partially demonstrates the pride that some Chinese journalists take in writing the exposés that lead to change in policy and improvement in governance (De Burgh 2003; Shirk 2011). On the other hand, however, the propensity to self-censorship among some journalists, a result of media control and other personal and societal factors (Hassid 2011), may decrease the level of criticism. Therefore, individual journalistic preferences may have an influence on news content.

Before moving on, it is important to stress that for analytical purposes, I discuss the above three fractures individually. In actuality, they are intricately intertwined. For example, it would never be possible for news professionals to separate their liberal aspirations from the reality of restricted media environment. It would also be inappropriate to separate the pursuit of commercial interests by news organizations from the influence of government officials. Therefore, the different fractures work together, resulting in sporadic criticisms coming out of the fractured censorship system, as demonstrated in the case studies from these chapters.

Having discussed fractured censorship in the news production process, in the second part I discuss the results of two field experiments where I test the effects of critical news on public opinion in authoritarian China. Through this, I draw implications on what effects such criticism may have on authoritarian duration. In this way, this study situates critical news in authoritarian duration through a two-step examination: (1) unpacking the news production process with a focus on fractured censorship, followed by (2) an examination of whether, and to what extent, critical news affect public opinion, a test for whether the critical news intentionally allowed by the party-state actually functions as the party-state intends it to.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the results from two field experiments where I focus on criticisms in news that are intentionally allowed by the party-state. The field experiments are designed to test hypotheses derived from previous studies on media effects in democratic contexts. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) pioneer study is among the first to empirically examine the effects of news. The major finding, conceptualized as agenda-setting and confirmed by later studies, is that the focus of attention by the news media on public issues can be transferred to the public's focus of attention (Iyengar & Kinder 1987; MacKuen 1981; McCombs 1981). Building on this, later studies of news effects find that by emphasizing certain issues over others, the news media can influence voters' evaluations of political actors (Krosnick & Kinder 1990). This is priming effect. Based on the effects of agenda-setting and priming found in democratic contexts, I derive two hypotheses using the widespread and contentious issue in China—demolition and relocation. The agenda-setting hypothesis postulates that being exposed to critical news on demolition and relocation will make participants more concerned about the issue. The priming hypothesis states that being exposed to critical news on demolition and relocation will make participants dissatisfied with the government's way of handling the issue.

Based on the quantitative analysis, I find that in the first field experiment—Yangzhou experiment conducted with adults in the eastern Chinese city Yangzhou, both agenda-setting and priming hypotheses are confirmed. However, being exposed to critical news on demolition and relocation does not undermine the participants' confidence in the government's capability to ultimately resolve the issue. The second field experiment shows different results. In the Xi'an experiment conducted with university students in the central Chinese city Xi'an, the results show neither agenda-setting nor priming effects. However, the results suggest the importance of non-media factors, such as participant's personal experience with demolition and relocation, and their

frequency of watching television news. The disparity in experimental results suggest that for different groups of people especially in terms of education and age, critical news may have different effects. While critical news may affect public opinion among less educated and older people, such effects seem to be lacking among more educated and younger people.

Overall, controlled media do not exhibit as much media effects as free media do. In the Xi'an experiment with university students, being exposed to critical news on the issue of demolition and relocation does not change any attitude of the university students on this issue. The controlled media exert less influence on public opinion in authoritarian China to begin with, and even among the critical news that does affect participants' attitudes such as in the Yangzhou experiment, it does not change the participants' confidence in the regime's governing capability. While this implies relatively weak media power, politically the results imply a mechanism that sustains the authoritarian rule. News reports that are critical of local governments and policies can blow off steam of public anger without compromising the legitimacy of the central leadership. Through this, the communist regime in China is able to buy more time to solve difficult social and political issues.

Chapter 6 concludes the study with a discussion of the implications of the findings. This study investigates the political role of the news media in authoritarian duration in China through (1) understanding the news media as a venue where power negotiations among politicians, journalists, and citizens occur; and (2) examining the potential effects of critical news on public opinion. In authoritarian China, censorship on the news media is not monolithic. There are fractures in the censorship system allowing sporadic criticisms on local governments and policies. In addition, the field experiments suggest agenda-setting and priming effects of television news on public perceptions of key social issues for certain demographics, especially the older and less

educated. Even when such media effects exist, they do not necessarily undermine public confidence in the governing capability of the regime. Moreover, for younger and more educated citizens, critical news has little effect on their attitudes on key social issues.

It has been a growing consensus among scholars that the CCP has become adept at making use of the news media to advance its political goals, fractures in the censorship system being such a strategy. The effects of critical news on public opinion are complex, but in general contribute to authoritarian duration in China. The nuanced understandings of the fractured censorship system and its effects on public opinion are important building blocks to comprehend the news media as a political actor in authoritarian China.



## **Chapter 2 Political Fracture: Monitoring Local Officials, Establishing Personal Authority**

Scholarly opinion has settled on the consensus that the Chinese party-state is not a monolithic actor. Indeed, the observation of distinct political interests at central and local levels has been used to explain a number of phenomena in authoritarian politics. For example, Egorov et al. (2009) find that dictators may use the news media to check local officials and ensure faithful local implementation of policies. Lorentzen et al. (2014) point out that the transparency initiatives in China stemmed from the top, reflecting the central leadership's motivation to rein in local government officials. More directly, scholars have found that local officials in China may selectively implement policies, depending on local officials' interests (O'Brien and Li 1999). As a result, the Chinese party-state has adopted several strategies to ensure local compliance, including tolerating small-scale social protests (Chen 2012), implementing village elections (Kennedy 2007), and granting more media freedom (Nathan 2003). Focusing on political fractures in the censorship system, this chapter examines two specific fractures embedded in the Chinese political system: (1) the need of the central leadership to monitor local officials, and (2) the need of local leaders to establish authority over their subordinates and to increase popularity among their superiors. Despite the diverging political interests of central and local leaders, they may both resort to the news media, specifically critical news, to help realize their political goals. Next, this chapter discusses the two specific fractures, with a focus on the embeddedness of these fractures in the current Chinese political system.

### **Central Leadership Using Criticism in News**

One of the central puzzles observed in Chinese politics is that the support for the central leadership is actually quite high, especially when compared with the support for national

leadership in democracies. Moreover, public support is generally higher for the central leadership than for the local governments in China (Li 2004, 2008; Saich 2007), which adds to the uniqueness of the puzzle. So far scholars have identified at least two mechanisms to explain such a puzzle. First, the discontent with the local governments can be attributed to the side effects of economic reform, such as the loss of social welfare, lay-offs from state-owned enterprises, and government corruption (Hurst and O'Brien 2002; Manion 2004; Pei 2006; Sun 2004), which tend to be blamed on the “closest face of the state” for most citizens and therefore the easiest target of grievances (Hildebrandt 2013, 40). Second, the public may blame the implementers of policies, that is, the local governments, rather than the central leadership who is actually responsible for creating unpopular policies (Hildebrandt 2013, 40). While these mechanisms focus on either the actual issues of contention or the chain of policy creation and implementation, I argue that an important missing factor in explaining the puzzle is the use of the news media by the central leadership. In fact, the central leadership has been using criticism in news to (1) create an image of “central good, local bad” and to (2) monitor local officials in cases of local noncompliance. While the former targets the public, the latter targets local officials. A result of using such critical news is higher public satisfaction with the central leadership than with local governments. This constitutes the political fracture. Next, this chapter tries to explain why and how the central leadership uses the news media to monitor local officials and establish a positive image among the public through examining the political institutions in the Chinese party-state.

#### *The elaborate system of control over local officials*

The institutional arrangement of the Chinese party-state is elaborate. It ensures the absolute authority of the central leadership over local governments and officials. At the same time, it provides a reasonable amount of autonomy to local governments in policy creation and

implementation. Vertically, the Chinese party-state consists of five distinct administrative levels: central, provincial, municipal, county, and township levels. Because of the vast geographical region the party-state has to rule over and a complex set of issues facing the Chinese society, to ensure local compliance has been a locus of contention. Local compliance is defined as local governments and officials closely following and faithfully implementing the laws, regulations, and directions from the central leadership. In order to ensure local compliance, the Chinese party-state has three important institutional components. First, in terms of formal institutions, the Chinese party-state is constitutionally a unitary state whereby all local governments are subordinate to the central government (Zheng 2006, 103). Specifically, the State Council, the top executive organ of the Chinese government, holds absolute authority and power over provincial governments as they must “accept the unified leadership by the State Council, implement administrative measures, regulations and decisions by the State Council, and be responsible and report to the State Council.” (Pu 1995, 223).

Second, the party-state uses the nomenklatura system (Burns 1989; 1994) to exercise personnel control over local officials. Introduced from the Soviet model, “the nomenklatura is a list of leading positions over whose appointments the Party exercises full control.” (Edin 2003a, 44) Based on the nomenklatura, the Party Organization Departments at each level have the authority to make personnel decisions, including promotion, dismissal, and transfer, at one level down the administrative hierarchy. As a result, cadres at lower levels are accountable to the next level up. According to Burns (1999), the Chinese party-state remains Leninist today partially because of the nomenklatura.

Third, in the early 1990s, the central leadership introduced a cadre responsibility system (CRS) in an attempt to improve governance. This elaborate system includes decentralization of

authority, employment contracts, setting of quantitative goals, introducing competition among state bureaucrats, use of economic incentives to encourage goal fulfillment, and using third parties to measure government performance (Edin 2003a, 37). The goals of the CRS are twofold—to increase governing efficiency and to better monitor and control local cadres (Edin 2003a). The CRS has a profound impact on the central-local relations in the Chinese party-state. Based on the evaluations specified in the CRS, cadres with outstanding performance can be promoted to a concurrent post at a higher level. This is to ensure that priority policies from the center are carried out by local cadres, and faithful implementation is linked to promotion and demotion decisions (Edin 2003b). Another important component of the CRS is that cadres may also be rotated to different geographical areas or administrative levels. The main purpose of cadre rotation is to curb localism, a perceived dangerous tendency to defy the central CCP leadership (Edin 2003a).

#### *The problem of local noncompliance*

Despite the institutional arrangements intended to ensure local compliance in terms of policy implementation, local noncompliance has persisted. Indeed, many scholars have noted that local governments in China and many other communist countries should not be viewed as mere implementers and faithful followers of the central leadership (e.g. Nelson 1980; Triska 1980). Local noncompliance can take on various forms, including delaying the execution of a policy or bending the details of a policy to serve local interests (Berman 1978; Chung 2000; Wang 2013).

There are several possible explanations, some of which are institutional, some not. Institutionally, the CRS requires segments of local governments to monitor and report the performance of local cadres. This can create a serious problem for fair and accurate evaluations

of local cadres, as it allows local cadres not to present accurate and comprehensive evaluations of local cadres (Edin 2003a). Moreover, fiscal decentralization and the development of local corporatism have contributed to the rise of local interests that may not always be consistent with the interests of the central leadership (Chen 2012, 63; Walder 1994, 311). Non-institutional factors include the nature of the policy being implemented. If the policy is perceived to threaten local interests, it may encounter resistance from local cadres to protect their vested interests (Chung 2000).

For example, in the early 1990s, the central government realized the seriousness of the problem of excessive financial burden on farmers in the forms of taxes and fees collected by local township governments. As a result, on the one hand, the central government seemed to agree with farmers that the excessive financial burden should be lightened. In fact, in 1993 the Law on Agriculture stipulated that rural taxes should not exceed 5 percent (Luo and Sun 1993, 56), even though local taxes averaged 10 percent of total farm income, with some localities levying taxes up to 20-40 percent of total farm income (Wedeman 2001, 59). On the other hand, however, the central government was unwilling to take serious consideration of the limited resources available to local cadres (Kennedy 2007). This only resulted in increasing difficulty in local cadres' tax and fee collection tasks as well as sustaining the local cadres' incentives to collect taxes and fees higher than officially approved. Besides local interests, the inherently contradictory central policy in the 1990s on rural taxes and fees also contributed to local noncompliance.

#### *Implications for central responses*

Even though some scholars have advocated conceptualizing the Chinese political system as federalism (Zheng 2006), the Chinese party-state remains unitary in the sense that the higher-

level governments have absolute authority over lower-level governments, although there is room for negotiation between local cadres and higher-level leaders on local implementation of certain policies. Indeed, ensuring local compliance is a major concern for the CCP leadership as it is a central component of the Leninist party doctrine. For Leninist parties, “membership is highly selective, and the party demands strict loyalty and obedience on the part of members.” (Gunther and Diamond 2003, 180) As Party organizations essentially control all levels and branches of government, and party members are expected to follow policies coming down from the institutional hierarchy strictly, all levels of party branches as well as governments are put under strict control by the central CCP leadership, at least in theory. It is through this level of strict control that the central leadership is able to create and implement policies, some of which are meant to tackle difficult and controversial problems involving intricate and entrenched local interests. For example, the Leninist means of control that emphasizes the nomenklatura system, centralization of decision-making, and supervision of implementation has been applied to regulate China’s financial industry (Heilmann 2005).

However, the extent to which such Leninist control actually works depends largely on political and economic conditions. For China, the economic reform-led fiscal decentralization has important political implications. Local governments in China, with the GDP-centered evaluation system, have great incentives to bow to local businesses more than higher political authorities. This has created a more “downward” and less “upward” orientation among local officials (Walder 1994, 311). Consequently, the Leninist control through formal institutions of supervision may not be as effective as it was designed to be, mainly because the prioritization of the local economy has compromised the importance of the Leninist party-state as an ideology. In

other words, generating economic growth has, to a certain extent, replaced the status of the communist ideology in the actual practice of Chinese central and local governments.

If the Leninist control is not as effective as it used to be to ensure local compliance in China, how did the Chinese central leadership react to maintain its firm control over local officials? Using critical news as one method, among many others, the Chinese central leadership has established an image of “central good, local bad” among the public. In the meantime, it selectively encourages the news media to disclose local officials’ wrongdoings, from incompetency to corruption, in order to correct recalcitrant local behaviors. Next, this chapter discusses the dual purposes of critical news used by the central leadership.

*(1) Creating an image of “central good, local bad”*

In a free media environment, there are a number of ways to write news stories critical of governments and officials. In China, however, even though local criticism exists, the way it is presented to the public can be specific. In fact, news criticisms have to accord with the “central good, local bad” image, or at least “local bad.” In order to achieve this goal, critical reports tend to center on cases of corruption or incompetency *after* higher-level political authorities have dealt with them. Sometimes such critical reports may follow political campaigns launched by the central leadership, such as the anti-corruption campaign launched in late 2012 by the current Chinese President Xi Jinping. It was widely understood among scholars that the main reason behind the launch of the campaign by Xi Jinping, who came to power during the 18<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress in November 2012, was to consolidate his authority and power, as well as the legitimacy of the CCP regime. Specifically, the anti-corruption campaign, despite its limited effects on strengthening rule of law, may serve Xi and the regime through (1) showing to the public the determination of the party leadership to rule out corruption that has contributed to

wealth inequality and social injustice; (2) signaling to CCP officials that Xi, as a new leader, has the authority and capability to implement guidelines and policies that he envisions and oversees; and (3) actually reducing the scale of corruption, as such a campaign does have effects, no matter how limited, on restraining officials' behavior (Wedeman 2012). For example, according to *Huashang Daily*, an influential newspaper published in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, after the anti-corruption campaign was launched, many local officials hurried to find real estate agents to sell apartments under their names, which may have been purchased using public money<sup>8</sup>.

After the 2012 anti-corruption campaign was launched, several high-level officials have been investigated and convicted, such as the mayor of Lanzhou, the capital city of Gansu province, the director of the propaganda department of the Chengdu municipal government in Sichuan province, the former governor of Hubei province, and the former deputy governor of Liaoning province<sup>9</sup>. Under the trend of punishing corrupt officials as part of the political campaign, news media followed up and published critical reports on officials that were already investigated or convicted. For example, *The Beijing News*, a liberal newspaper that will be discussed in detail as a case study in Chapter 4, published an investigative report<sup>10</sup> on Zhu Tianxiao (hereafter Zhu), a real estate developer who benefited from his close relationship with the former mayor of Nanjing, the capital city of Jiangsu province. The intimate relationship between the former mayor of Nanjing, Ji Jianye (hereafter Ji), and real estate developers such as Zhu brought about benefits not only to Ji in the forms of wealth and political track records, but also to Zhu in the form of wealth. This was thus a mutually beneficial relationship between a politician and a businessman. As Ji was investigated by the Central Discipline Commission of

---

<sup>8</sup> The report can be accessed here: <http://finance.qq.com/a/20121223/000196.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Xinhua News Agency, the official news agency of the CCP, compiled a list of convicted officials after the 2012 anti-corruption campaign. The list can be accessed here: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2003-10/30/content\\_1150976.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2003-10/30/content_1150976.htm)

<sup>10</sup> The report can be accessed here: <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/inside/2013/11/21/293832.html>



the CCP, Zhu was investigated, as well. This investigative report also traced Ji's relationship with other businessmen during his political career as mayor of Yangzhou and mayor of Nanjing. The downfall of Ji has resulted in the downfall of a number of business-men and -women. Beyond this specific case, the report also points out the seriousness of the problem of politician-businessman collusion.

Although such reports focus on cases that were already dealt with by the party-state, they can help the party-state achieve the goals of the anti-corruption campaign. Reporting on such corruption cases not only publicizes to the public the efforts by the party-state to eliminate corrupt officials, but also functions as a warning sign to local officials that may have engaged in similar corrupt behaviors. Of course, the intention of the central leadership is highly difficult, if not impossible, to prove, as is a common problem in the study of authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, public opinion data can indirectly corroborate the hypothesis that the central leadership intends to create an image of "central good, local bad" to maintain the overall legitimacy of the regime. For example, based on survey data, Li (2008) finds that Chinese farmers have more confidence in the central leadership's *intent* than its *ability* to ensure faithful implementation of its policies by local governments. This suggests a successful example of the established image of "central good, local bad."

## *(2) Monitoring local officials for compliance*

The second purpose for the central leadership to use critical news is to monitor local officials and to ensure local compliance. In order to achieve this goal, the critical reports tend to disclose local recalcitrant or even illegal behavior *before* relevant officials are investigated and disciplined. This is different from the critical reports discussed in the above section.

For such critical reports, a common technique used by journalists is to evoke laws and regulations to show local noncompliance and to provide legitimacy to the reports, should they encounter obstacles to publication. This is a common technique used by both newspapers and television news shows. In fact, protesters may also evoke laws and regulations to make a case and bargain with officials (Chen 2012). Scholars have coined a term to describe such a strategy--“rightful resistance” (O’Brien and Li 2006). However, because such reports disclose cases that may have not been brought to official attention, such reports tend to be critical at a lesser extent, as compared to critical reports in the previous category. Specifically, such critical reports may focus on issues such as incompetence on the part of local officials that stems from negligence or miscommunication, but not nefarious schemes or gross corruption.

For example, *Focus* is a reputational television news show broadcast on China Central Television (CCTV), the central-level television station in China. *Focus* is known for its investigative and often critical reporting. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, television stations in China are affiliated with governments at different administrative levels. This has granted television stations at higher administrative levels the power to monitor and criticize governments at lower administrative levels. *Focus*, for example, a CCTV news show, often criticizes local governments at township, county, and municipal levels. Sometimes it may even criticize provincial governments. Consequently, due to its central-level status, many of its reports have led to changes in policy implementation and governance at local levels. In fact, its investigative reports and criticism have been so effective that on its official website<sup>11</sup>, there is a section devoted to specifying how relevant government agencies have responded to its reports, mostly correcting noncompliant or incompetent behavior. For example, in its October 22, 2013

---

<sup>11</sup> The URL for the website is <http://cctv.cntv.cn/lm/jiaodianfangtan/index.shtml>

report<sup>12</sup>, *Focus* discloses problems in a local county government's work to help farmers acquire loans from local banks. The problem was not corruption, but miscommunication between the bank and the government. This miscommunication led to the failure of farmers' efforts to acquire loans and develop livestock businesses. The case happened in Guanghe County in Gansu Province. During the night this episode of *Focus* was broadcast on CCTV, provincial-level leaders in Gansu issued directives to solve the problem of miscommunication. Municipal-level leaders convened an emergency meeting that night to discuss possible solutions<sup>13</sup>.

In certain cases, reports from *Focus* may attract attention from ministry leaders at the central level. For example, in its October 23, 2013 report, *Focus* discloses illegal medical practices in Beijing and Hubei. This has led to the National Health and Family Planning Commission, a central-level commission directly under the State Council<sup>14</sup>, to establish a special task force with the aim to eliminate illegal medical practices<sup>15</sup>.

As compared to the reports serving the purpose of establishing an image of "central good, local bad," critical reports that intend to help ensure local compliance usually stay modest. Indeed, if a television news show at the central level criticizes local governments on "mild" problems such as incompetence, local television news shows would encounter greater difficulties in critical reporting, as they are subject to local governments' control due to their low administrative levels. These difficulties will be discussed in detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

### **Local Leaders Using Criticism in News to Establish Authority and to Please Superiors**

While central leadership may use critical news to establish a positive image among the public and to ensure local compliance, local leaders may also resort to critical news in order to

---

<sup>12</sup> The transcript can be accessed here: <http://news.cntv.cn/2013/10/22/VIDE1382443319781520.shtml>

<sup>13</sup> The report can be accessed here: <http://news.cntv.cn/20131204/104262.shtml>

<sup>14</sup> The State Council is the top executive branch of the Chinese party-state.

<sup>15</sup> The report can be accessed here: <http://news.cntv.cn/20131204/104261.shtml>

establish his or her authority among subordinates and to please superiors. This has its roots in the cadre management system in China.

Political leaders in China are not popularly and democratically elected. They are appointed by superiors through the *nomenklatura* system. As a result, a number of problems such as localism may arise. Simply put, in the Chinese politics context, localism overlaps with local noncompliance, referring to the problem that local officials may not fully obey directives from the center. In fact, localism appeared back in the Maoist period. During the early period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Mao felt that his power was challenged not only by top leaders such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, but also by provincial leaders. Consequently, he replaced all party-secretaries at the provincial level (Li and Bachman 1989, 84). In the post-reform era, localism takes on a dual form—political and economic. While political localism refers to the power centers at local levels that may not fully carry out central policies, economic localism exists due to financial decentralization and the development of local industries. Specifically, the profit retention policy and the increase in extra-budgetary funds provided local governments with greater financial independence. Moreover, with regards to local economic development policies, local governments have more power to make decisions such as allocating loans and offering tax exemptions to local enterprises (Li and Bachman 1989, 85-6).

From the perspective of economic growth and effective governance, a certain degree of localism may not necessarily be undesirable. For the central leadership in China, however, curbing localism is deemed vital to maintaining the CCP rule. Indeed, a central doctrine of the Leninist party-state is the absolute control over all government branches at all levels by the Communist Party. Therefore, provincial level leaders such as the party secretaries and governors are directly appointed by the Central Organization Department of the CCP. Moreover, provincial

leaders are routinely moved from province to province, or in and out of posts in Beijing, in an attempt to prevent local power centers from growing (Bo 2002, Ch. 4; Lawrence and Martin 2013; Li 2001, Ch. 3). For leaders at lower levels such as the municipal, county, and township levels, it is the leader at the next level up that appoints the subordinates. This is the “one-level-down management” model (O’Brien and Li 1999). For example, the county head is usually appointed by the mayor of the municipality to which the county belongs.

The Chinese party-state also tried to institutionalize such practices in cadre promotion to curtail localism. In June 1999, the Central Organization Department of the CCP issued *The Regulation of Cadre Exchange*, which specifies that (1) county and municipal top leaders should not be selected from the same region; (2) those who head a county or city for over ten years should be transferred to another place; and (3) provincial leaders should be transferred more frequently to another province or the central government (Li 2001, 65-6). Based on such a cadre promotion system, provincial-level leaders have great incentives and needs to establish personal authority in the jurisdiction, as many of them rotate between provinces or in and out of Beijing.

One such provincial leader was Li Yuanchao (hereafter Li). He was the Vice Minister of Culture from 1996 to 2000, before being appointed as the deputy party secretary of Jiangsu province in 2000. From 2001 to 2003, he held concurrent positions also as the party secretary of Nanjing, the capital city of Jiangsu province. From 2002 to 2007, Li was the party secretary of Jiangsu province. After five years of being the head of Jiangsu province, Li was again promoted back to Beijing as the head of the Central Organization Department of the CCP and a member of the Political Bureau from 2007 to 2012. During this time, he held the concurrent position of Secretariat of the Central Committee of the CCP. Since 2013, Li has served as the vice president

of China<sup>16</sup>. Based on this brief account of Li's recent political career, he is an example of a high-level official that was appointed and promoted in and out of Beijing.

As discussed earlier, the main reason for the central leadership to move leaders from provinces to provinces and in and out of Beijing is to prevent localism. However, precisely because of this practice, provincial leaders have great incentives and needs to establish personal authority in an unfamiliar environment, both to consolidate personal power and to facilitate smoother and more effective governance. Li, who was transferred to Jiangsu from Beijing in 2001, resorted to critical news in order to establish an image of a tough and formidable leader who means business. He personally visited the newsroom of a popular television news show *Just in Nanjing*, and encouraged the anchor Meng Fei, who was famous for his outspoken and sharp commentary, to produce more critical news to supervise the government, so that government officials can better serve the people. Moreover, Li even specified that the criticism could go all the way up to officials at bureau chief level (Interview 16). As a result, *Just in Nanjing* devoted a substantial amount of airtime to critical reporting, most of which centers on the lack of or insufficient provision of public goods, government incompetency, and bureaucratic ineptitude. According to a content analysis of *Just in Nanjing*, among the 170 news reports, only 5 were about positive party and policy news. In contrast, there were 93 reports that were critical of governments and officials (Chen 2004).

On a side note, in the case of *Just in Nanjing*, Li's encouragement for criticism is only one part of the picture. The producer of the show is the other indispensable part that decides news content, which will be discussed in detail as a case study in Chapter 4.

---

<sup>16</sup> An official account of Li's political career can be accessed through the official Xinhua News Agency: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-03/14/c\\_132233077.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-03/14/c_132233077.htm)

Following the strategy to use criticism and supervision to establish personal authority, besides critical news, Li also launched a public event, “Tens of Thousands of Citizens Evaluate Government Departments” 万人评议机关 in 2001 when he was the party secretary of Nanjing. This was part of the notion of “service-oriented government” that he put forward. The tenet of this notion was that the public evaluates government leaders (Miller 2011). During this event, the Nanjing government first provided a list of 70 government departments under the Nanjing municipal government to the public. Then the government randomly selected around ten thousand Nanjing citizens and invited them to anonymously evaluate the 70 government departments. For those departments that ranked at the bottom based on the citizen evaluations, relevant officials in charge were subject to criticism or even demotion. For those departments that ranked at the top, the Nanjing municipal government publicly praised them and set them as models for other departments to learn from. In fact, this event was institutionalized as a yearly public evaluation event. The most recent “Tens of Thousands of Citizens Evaluate Government Departments” was held in 2013<sup>17</sup>.

Indeed, the impact of such events in Nanjing was real. For example, in the 2001 event, the bureau chiefs of the bottom five bureaus on the public evaluations list were all punished. According to a report<sup>18</sup> from *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Central Committee of the CCP, the chief of the real estate bureau was demoted; the administrative post was removed for the chief of city appearance bureau; the remaining three bureau chiefs were criticized and educated. Besides *People’s Daily*, the official Xinhua News Agency also published commentary<sup>19</sup> praising such events, commenting that this “reduces the distance between the

---

<sup>17</sup> *Nanjing Daily*, the party paper of the CCP Nanjing Committee, published a report on the 2013 “Tens of Thousands of Citizens Evaluate Government Departments” event. <http://www.njdaily.cn/2013/1220/702720.shtml>

<sup>18</sup> This report can be accessed at <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/historic/0219/5814.html>

<sup>19</sup> The commentary can be accessed at [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2004-01/28/content\\_1293261.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2004-01/28/content_1293261.htm)

government and the people.” In other words, Li’s strategy to turn to criticism and supervision by the news media and the public, a decision that stemmed from his need to consolidate his personal authority, was met with approval and praise from the central leadership.

\*\*\*

For local leaders, besides establishing personal authority, they have to please their superiors. As discussed earlier, Chinese officials are not elected by the people, but selected by the party-state. The control over personnel is a key component of the Leninist party-state system. Due to this need, some local leaders creatively use the news media to publicize and show off their political track records, not only in front of the public, but more importantly, in front of their superiors.

But how to use the news media is a tricky question. Unlike the Maoist time when overwhelming propaganda and suppression over alternative information were the rule, with the unquestioned but questionable assumption that manipulating news and commentary in mass media can greatly help shape the hearts and minds of the people, the public does not believe in excessive positive news any more. When the real lives of ordinary citizens are confronted with a number of problems ranging from rising housing prices, shrinking medical resources, widening urban-rural gaps, to local protests due to land grabs and other kinds of injustice, positive news and commentary not only may not create a positive image of the government, but may instigate antagonistic feelings among the public that the government is incompetent and negligent. This is especially true for local governments, as discussed earlier, who often take the blame for many kinds of social issues. But creative local leaders resorted to criticism in the news media, realizing that political shows can mobilize substantial popular support and create an image of a popular, competent, and innovative leader in the eyes of the superiors.



*Asking Politics on Television* 电视问政 is a highly popular television show aired on Wuhan Television in Hubei province. It was created in 2011 under the direct leadership of the party secretary of Wuhan municipality Ruan Chengfa (hereafter Ruan). According to a report<sup>20</sup> from *Southern Weekend*, a renowned liberal newspaper in China, during the decision-making process of creating the show, there was disagreement among top leaders of Wuhan municipality regarding whether to live broadcast the show or to record and edit it before broadcast. With Ruan's push, the standing committee of the CCP Wuhan Committee decided to live broadcast *Asking Politics on Television*. This is a yearly special show, and each year there are about two to five episodes, depending on the decisions from the municipal government. For Wuhan television station, this show was a task coming from the municipality. Although this show has been highly popular and has brought in considerable revenue to the television station, the idea to create such a show directly came from the political leadership at the municipality. As a result, although this was a political task, it was an easy task for television producers and anchors, as bureau chiefs and relevant leaders-in-charge at government departments have no choice but to attend the show, sometimes to be grilled, once their names were listed by Ruan and the discipline commission of the CCP Wuhan Committee. In fact, it was reported that Ruan once requested the anchor to question a member of the standing committee of the CCP Wuhan Committee "until he sweats" (Chu and Luo 2013).

*Asking Politics on Television* is highly popular among the public. Its ratings were even higher than primetime television dramas in 2012, according to a report<sup>21</sup> from *People's Daily*. There are at least three factors contributing to its popularity. First, part of the audience in the studio that could directly question and challenge government officials were ordinary Wuhan

---

<sup>20</sup> This report can be accessed at <http://www.infzm.com/content/93608>

<sup>21</sup> This report can be accessed at <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2013/1227/c40606-23955438.html>

citizens, who registered through online open enrollment. According to the *People's Daily* report, many of these audience members and their families and friends became loyal viewers of the show ever since. Second, this show has had a real impact on local politics. Since the creation of the show in 2011 to April 2012, there were 96 cases discussed on *Asking Politics on Television*, among which 16 leaders were punished by the discipline commission of the CCP Wuhan Committee and 106 leaders were criticized, according to the *People's Daily* report. Of course, this does not mean that all incompetent or corrupt government officials were punished as a result of the show. Nor does it mean that the anchor can ask any questions to the government officials. In fact, there were specific limits as to which questions cannot be asked. For example, questions about whether and how much gifts, no matter in the form of money or commodity, should not be asked. In addition, political questions were restricted within certain limits (Chu and Luo 2013).

Third, the format of the show, that is, essentially grilling government officials publicly, attracts public attention not only because of its novelty but also because it functions like a punching bag for ordinary citizens, who face all kinds of social problems that can be attributed to government negligence, incompetency, or corruption. In fact, in media reports on *Asking Politics on Television*, a common observation that was reported over and over again was the fact that many government officials “sweat” or “bow and apologize” to the public when questioned about their abysmal job performance as public servants. Videos of the excerpts of the show have gone viral in the Chinese cyberspace. One government official privately complained to the anchor of the show that, “I just bowed to the audience once, and CCTV (China Central Television) re-broadcast my bow 17 times!” (Chu and Luo 2013) Indeed, government officials “sweating” and “apologizing” were such uncommon phenomenon in China’s state-society relations and political landscape that live broadcasting such embarrassing moments created strong reactions in the

public discourse. For ordinary citizens, no matter how much they believe in such apologies or whether they believe real change would come after this, the act alone by government officials that was amplified through television screens already prompted wide and deep attention from the public, local governments in other localities, and the central leadership.

After *Asking Politics on Television* became popular, municipal governments in other provinces quickly followed up and created similar television shows. In fact, all the television shows share the same name, that is, *Asking Politics on Television*. So far there are *Asking Politics on Television* in Wuhan of Hubei province, Changsha of Hunan province, Yinchuan of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Bazhong of Sichuan province, and many other cities in Guangdong and Henan provinces. The *People's Daily* report dubbed such a new form of television supervision as the “final exams” for government officials, since such shows are also seen as a year-end review and evaluation of government officials.

The central leadership, however, through its mouthpiece media such as CCTV and *People's Daily*, has sent out inconsistent signals regarding its view on the popularity and future of the asking politics shows that exist at municipal levels. On the one hand, *People's Daily* in its December 27, 2013 report<sup>22</sup> praised such television shows based on (1) their popularity among the public, (2) the removal of formalism embodied in the direct questioning and grilling of government officials, and (3) their real impact in terms of punishment on incompetent or corrupt officials. Overall, the commentary from *People's Daily* takes a positive tone towards the asking politics shows. Moreover, citing a law professor from Beijing University, *People's Daily* argued at the end of the report that asking politics shows should be normalized or institutionalized.

CCTV, on the other hand, put forward a different interpretation of the asking politics shows. In a news magazine show *News 1+1* aired daily on CCTV news channel, the title of its

---

<sup>22</sup> The report can be accessed at <http://media.people.com.cn/n/2013/1227/c40606-23955438.html>

December 24, 2012 episode<sup>23</sup> was “Asking Politics on Television, What Were They Able to Ask?”<sup>24</sup> Skepticism toward the asking politics shows filled the episode. Besides questioning the format of the show, that is, excessive gimmick and the selective list of officials to be questioned on the show, the anchorwoman also raised the question of how to “normalize” or “institutionalize” such a supervisory mechanism. The guest on the show argued that local people’s congresses should be the political entity to supervise governments. Therefore, instead of using television shows to supervise government officials, a legal way to normalize or institutionalize the supervisory mechanism is to voice opinions, concerns, and criticisms through local people’s congresses. In other words, CCTV’s opinion was that *Asking Politics on Television* shows cannot legitimately supervise government officials, because news media do not have the right to do so. It was the people’s congresses at various levels that have the right and responsibility to supervise government.

Interestingly, the guest on CCTV’s *News 1+1* that voiced the above opinion is the same law professor from Beijing University quoted in the *People’s Daily* article. Indeed, the two reports from CCTV and *People’s Daily* center on the same question—how to normalize or institutionalize such a supervisory mechanism, which is obviously needed for effective governance in China. Although quoting the same law professor, *People’s Daily* omitted the professor’s opinion to rely on people’s congress, rather than the news media, to supervise government, whereas CCTV broadcast the full version of this professor’s view. Of course, without prior discussion and pre-approval from the propaganda department, this professor’s view would not be published or broadcast on central-level media outlets. Nevertheless, the distinct use of the professor’s view by CCTV and *People’s Daily* begs further investigation.

---

<sup>23</sup> The transcript and video can be accessed at <http://news.cntv.cn/2012/12/24/VIDE1356358685995606.shtml>

<sup>24</sup> 电视问政，问出了什么？

However, like many other political issues in authoritarian regimes, it is often times very difficult, if not impossible, for scholars to get a full and true picture of what was really going on. A possible explanation for the diverging path between CCTV and *People's Daily* on this issue is media competition. Although blessed with abundant financial and talent resources as compared to television stations at lower levels, CCTV is also more restrained in terms of content. It is the mouthpiece of the Central Committee of the CCP, thus it bears the important task of representing the central leadership. Local television stations, in contrast, are mainly managed and controlled by local governments. With less financial support from local governments compared to the CCTV, local television stations have relatively more room to experiment with new forms of shows, the primary goal being profits. Singing shows such as *The Voice of China* and *Chinese Idol* and dating shows such as *You Are the One*, were all originated from local television stations and spread horizontally to other local television stations. In fact, these popular shows, including *Asking Politics on Television*, enjoy high ratings and thus have brought in envious amounts of profits to local television stations. For example, the rating of Wuhan *Asking Politics on Television* in 2012 was three times that of primetime television dramas, according to a report from a Shanghai-based metropolitan newspaper *News Morning*. In Chenzhou, Hunan province, *Asking Politics on Television* has greatly increased the rating of the first channel of Chenzhou Television. In 2013 the rating of *Asking Politics on Television* was three times that of the channel's previous show in the same time slot. Moreover, the ranking of the first channel of Chenzhou Television increased from Number 10 to Number 3 among the over 60 channels available in the Chenzhou area, due to the broadcast of *Asking Politics on Television* (Xiang and Zhou 2013). Therefore, local television stations are powerful competitors of CCTV. Based on this, it would not be unreasonable to speculate that CCTV's diminishing the role of television in

government supervision serves its own interest as a dominant force in the Chinese television landscape.

If CCTV's skepticism over *Asking Politics on Television* is due to its competition with local television stations, then we can reasonably reach the understanding that local leaders can use criticism in the news media to earn attention and please superiors through showing off his or her political track records and the ability to use the news media. The praise from central-level *People's Daily* and the fact that this format of political show has been adopted in a number of other localities demonstrate the success of the show. The person that wins most is the party secretary of Wuhan municipality, who was key to creating and sustaining the show. The wide publicity and positive reactions that resulted from live broadcasting *Asking Politics on Television* earned Ruan the reputation of being able to proactively use the news media to the advantage of the government among his superiors.

## **Conclusion**

The media have always been an important tool controlled and used by the party-state for political purposes, based on the Leninist party-state system. However, the way the party-state uses the media evolves under different political conditions. As the economic and political reform proceeds, the political realities in China, specifically the diverging interests of the central and local governments, propelled politicians to resort to non-political means to achieve political goals, be it ensuring local compliance or establishing personal authority. One of those means is criticism in the news media. The central government can use critical news not only to monitor local officials, but also to establish the image of "central good, local bad." Local leaders can use critical news to establish personal authority and consolidate power bases, as well as to please superiors through publicizing their political track records and showing off their ability to use the

news media. In fact, the media reform in the 1990s, an important result of which is increasing media market competition, provides another fracture in the censorship system. The pursuit of profit has sometimes driven news professionals to pursue political criticism. It is to this fracture that Chapter 3 turns.

### **Chapter 3 Market Fracture: Market Competition Among News Organizations**

The concept of media market only came into prominence among news professionals since media marketization was launched together with market reform in 1978 and accelerated after 1992. Before media marketization, almost all media organizations in China received complete state funding and were under strict state control. After media marketization, state funding reduced substantially, and media organizations now have to rely on advertising and other sources of revenue to maintain operation (Chan and Qiu 2002; De Burgh 2003; Esarey 2005; Shirk 2011; Volland 2012). Characterized by deregulation, commercialization, and partial privatization (Stockmann 2013), media marketization directly resulted in a sharp increase in the number of news outlets, which naturally caused intense competition for audiences and readers in the media market. The competition in turn influences the content and style of news. Specifically, in order to appeal to broader audiences and readers, traditional media such as television and newspapers have resorted to either “vulgar” news that often involves sex, violence, and sensational celebrity gossip, or critical news that exposes officials’ wrongdoings or incompetency. For television stations, the instant success of television life news shows, as their consistently high ratings show, clearly demonstrates a model of profitable news production. Of course, the force of market competition can drive news production in a number of directions, and criticism is only one of those directions. Nevertheless, reporting on news stories critical of local governments and policies can establish a strong media reputation among audiences and readers. Based on this, newspaper and website editors as well as television producers employ a number of techniques navigating a media environment that does not usually welcome politically critical news.



In this chapter, I first outline media marketization consequential to the fierce market competition in today's media landscape. Then I specify the techniques that news professionals have developed in order to navigate a strict media regulation environment. Next I use case studies to demonstrate how the need to earn profit drives news professionals to pursue critical news through various techniques, as well as the limitations for market-driven critical reporting. Finally, I find that market-driven critical reporting has transformed media responsibility in contemporary Chinese society.

Before delving into the complex components and dynamic process of media marketization, it is helpful to first outline the consequences of media marketization and to connect the chapters of fractures that are individually discussed for analytical purposes but are in actually intricately related. There are three important actors in the fractured censorship system—the central and local governments and officials, news organizations, and journalists. So far we have discussed the political actors. The central leadership allows critical reporting in order to maintain a positive image of itself among the public through blaming local officials, and local officials allow critical reporting in order to establish personal authority or to please superiors (Chapter 2). In addition, the governments allow criticism also for news outlets to attract audience and readers, because of the substantially reduced state funding (Chapter 3). As a result, the party-state has to maintain a fine balance between firm control over the news media and more market freedom for news organizations. On the other hand, news organizations have great incentives and needs to earn profits through news production, a direct result of media marketization (Chapter 3). There are, certainly, a number of approaches to news production that can attract audience and readers, but criticism in news is an important one. Based on this, the central argument of this chapter is that the need of news organizations to earn profits may drive journalists to pursue

critical reporting in order to increase ratings or circulation, which constitutes the market fracture in the censorship system.

### **Media Marketization and Competition**

Media marketization marks the transformation of the Chinese media in terms of (1) its evolving political nature and (2) the expansion of news outlets and the consequent market competition. Before 1978, all forms of mass media in China were seen by the CCP as tools of propaganda. They were strict instruments of political power. According to Liu (1971, 6), the most important function of the mass media in Leninist states is to “transmit the Party’s or state’s programs and instructions to the masses.” As a result, the media “are adjunct to the Party apparatus and must be controlled completely by it.” (Liu 1971, 6) In other words, the media were supposed to serve only the party-state. After 1978, under the overarching policy of reform and opening-up, “media were intended to serve both the state and the market.” (Stockmann 2013, 50) While the nature of being propaganda tools remains true and important, the media are also expected to generate profits, state-owned and partially privatized alike. Reflected in the actual news content, for example, many television news shows and newspapers have to carry news information from the party-state and commentary that conforms to the party-state’s official positions, as well as news that appeals to the public. News of the latter kind will bring profits to news organizations. The evolving political nature of the media, that is, from a pure political tool to a marketized entity that also needs to serve the party-state, signifies loosening control over the media. This has led to the expansion of news outlets and subsequent market competition.

With the receding importance of being a political tool and the increasing space allowed by the party-state for diversity in news content, the number of news outlets and the production of news grew exponentially. According to China Statistical Yearbook published by the National

Bureau of Statistics<sup>25</sup>, the number of officially licensed newspapers has grown almost five times, from 69 in 1979 to 1,918 in 2012, although with a sharp decline in the late 1980s due to the political upheaval that culminated in June 1989 on Tiananmen Square, as shown in Figure 3.1. The speed of increase was the fastest in the 1990s, the peak of media marketization, but the number of newspapers stabilized at around 1,900 since the mid-2000s. As the number of newspapers circulated in the market increases, the competition among newspapers has also been growing. For example, the number of printed copies of newspapers shows a pattern of consistent increase. According to China Statistical Yearbook, the annual printed copies of licensed newspapers increased from 0.8 billion copies in 1950 to 47.8 billion copies in 2013, a 60-fold increase in 63 years, as shown in Figure 3.2.

Such exponential increase, however, does not necessarily imply that it adds to the difficulty for the Chinese party-state to monitor and control newspapers. Besides the licensing system that is in place to control newspaper publications, there are partially state-owned media groups—conglomerates of media outlets to be more specific—that encompass most of the newspapers. For example, Southern Newspaper Media Group 南方报业传媒集团, established in July 2004, is a state-owned enterprise belonging to the CCP Guangdong Committee. It is managed by the propaganda department of the CCP Guangdong committee, according to the *Communiqué on the Structure of the Southern Newspaper Media Group* issued by the institution commission of Guangdong province<sup>26</sup>. It has 10 newspapers, 8 magazines, and 4 websites. The media groups bear responsibilities to ensure politically correct news reports. Therefore, despite

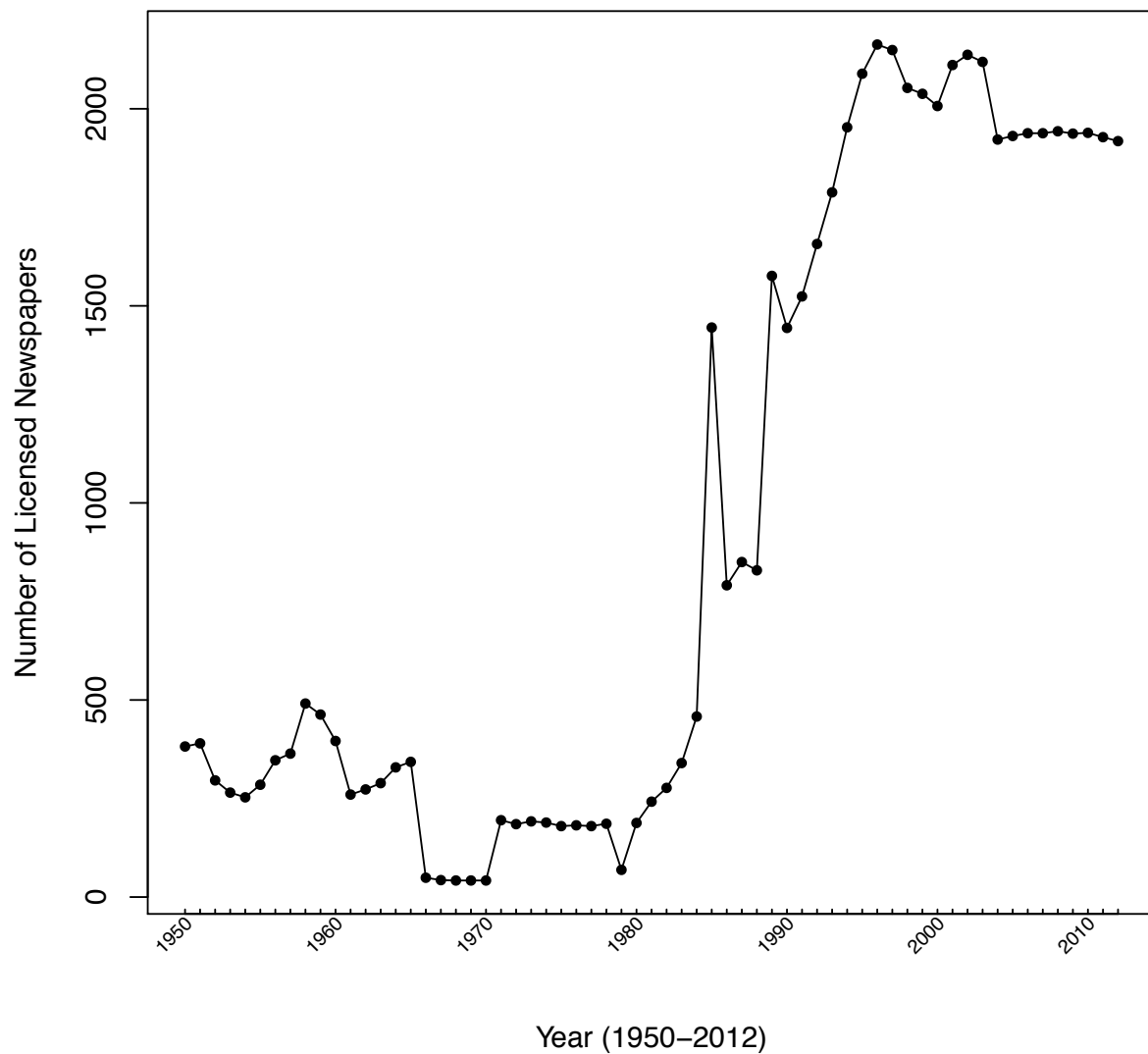
---

<sup>25</sup> The data are accessed through China Data Online, a database published by China Data Center at the University of Michigan. It was founded in 1997 and it brings together data inaccessible to many scholars because of language and format difficulty.

<sup>26</sup> The communiqué can be accessed at <http://www.gdcb.gov.cn/admin/attachment/upload/1348458164623.pdf>

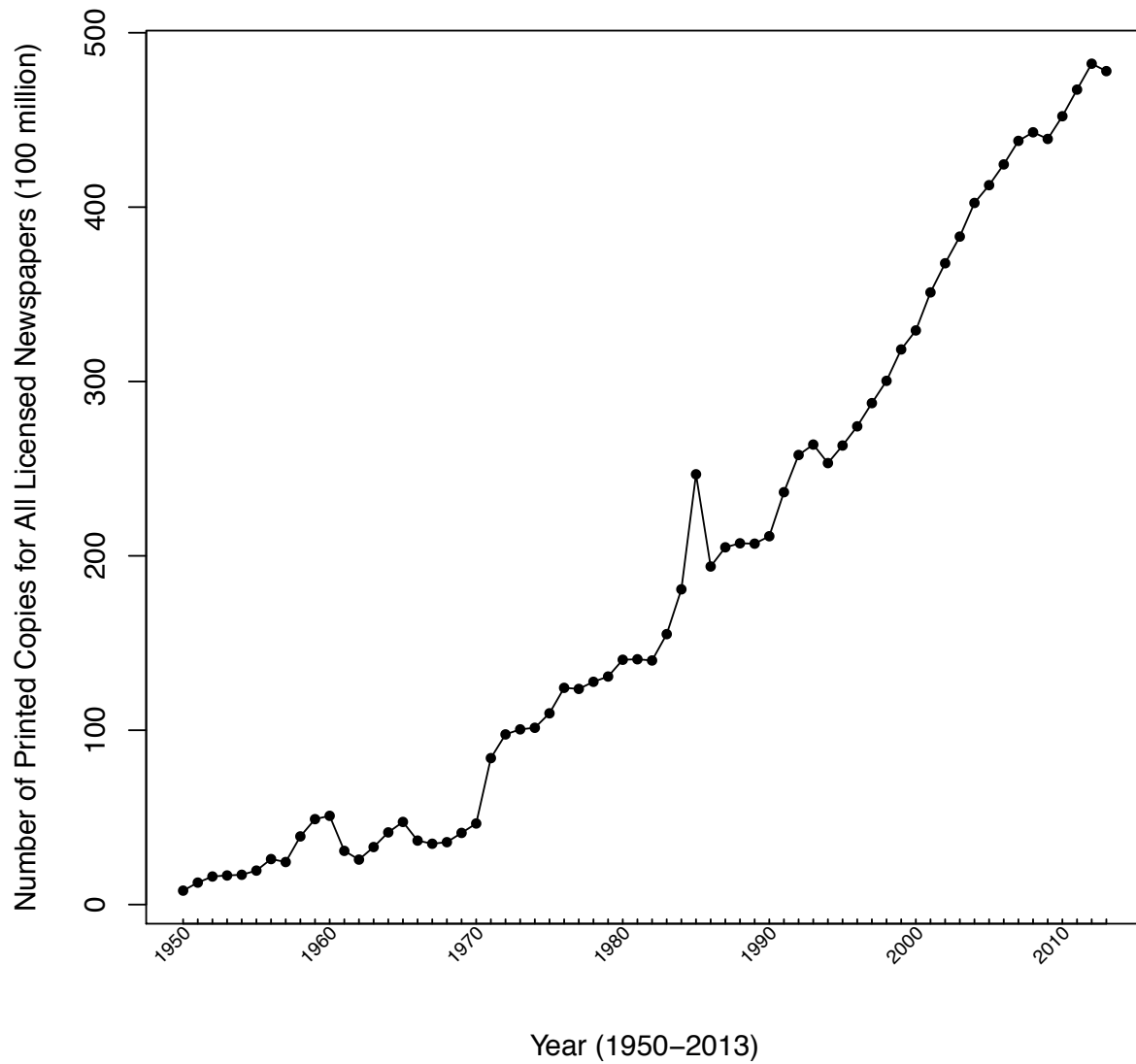
the increase in the number of newspapers, through the mid-level state-owned media groups, the Chinese party-state is able to exercise firm control over newspapers.

**Figure 3.1 Number of Licensed Newspapers in China, 1950-2012**



Source: China Statistical Yearbook, accessed through China Data Online

**Figure 3.2 Number of Printed Copies of Licensed Newspapers in China, 1950-2013.**



Source: China Statistical Yearbook, accessed through China Data Online

Unlike newspaper, Chinese television stations were created in parallel with the administrative levels in the party-state. In 1983, the party-state created the policy of “four-level television stations,” with the publication of the No. 37 Document approving the *Reporting*

*Outline for Radio and Television Work*.<sup>27</sup> According to this document, Chinese governments at central, provincial, municipal, and county levels should all have affiliated television stations (Huang and Zhou 2003, 31). This led to a substantial expansion of television stations, which peaked in 1997 with 923 stations. In 1999, however, the State Council, the top executive body in China, issued *Instructions on Strengthening Radio and Television Cable Network Construction Management* 关于加强广播电视有线网络建设管理的意见<sup>28</sup>, deciding to streamline the structure of Chinese television. This can be attributed to a number of factors such as limited local audiences, especially for county-level television stations, low-quality television shows, and an increasingly diverse media market that seemed more difficult to manage (Huang and Zhou 2003). Consequently, county-level radio and television stations were cancelled, which led to a sharp decrease in the number of television stations in 1998, as shown in Figure 3.3. By the end of 2012, there were a total of 183 television stations in Mainland China<sup>29</sup>.

Despite the decrease in the number of television stations, the competition in the Chinese television market has not been declining. For example, each television station has multiple channels, so even with decreasing television stations, the number of television channels has been growing steadily, from 219 in 1985 to 3,272 in 2010, a 15-fold increase in 25 years, as shown in Figure 3.4. On the other hand, the penetration rate of television in China has grown from 78% in 1989 to 97.62% in 2010. Since 2004, the penetration rate of television in China has remained above 95%. As the size of the television audience has only been mildly growing, especially after

---

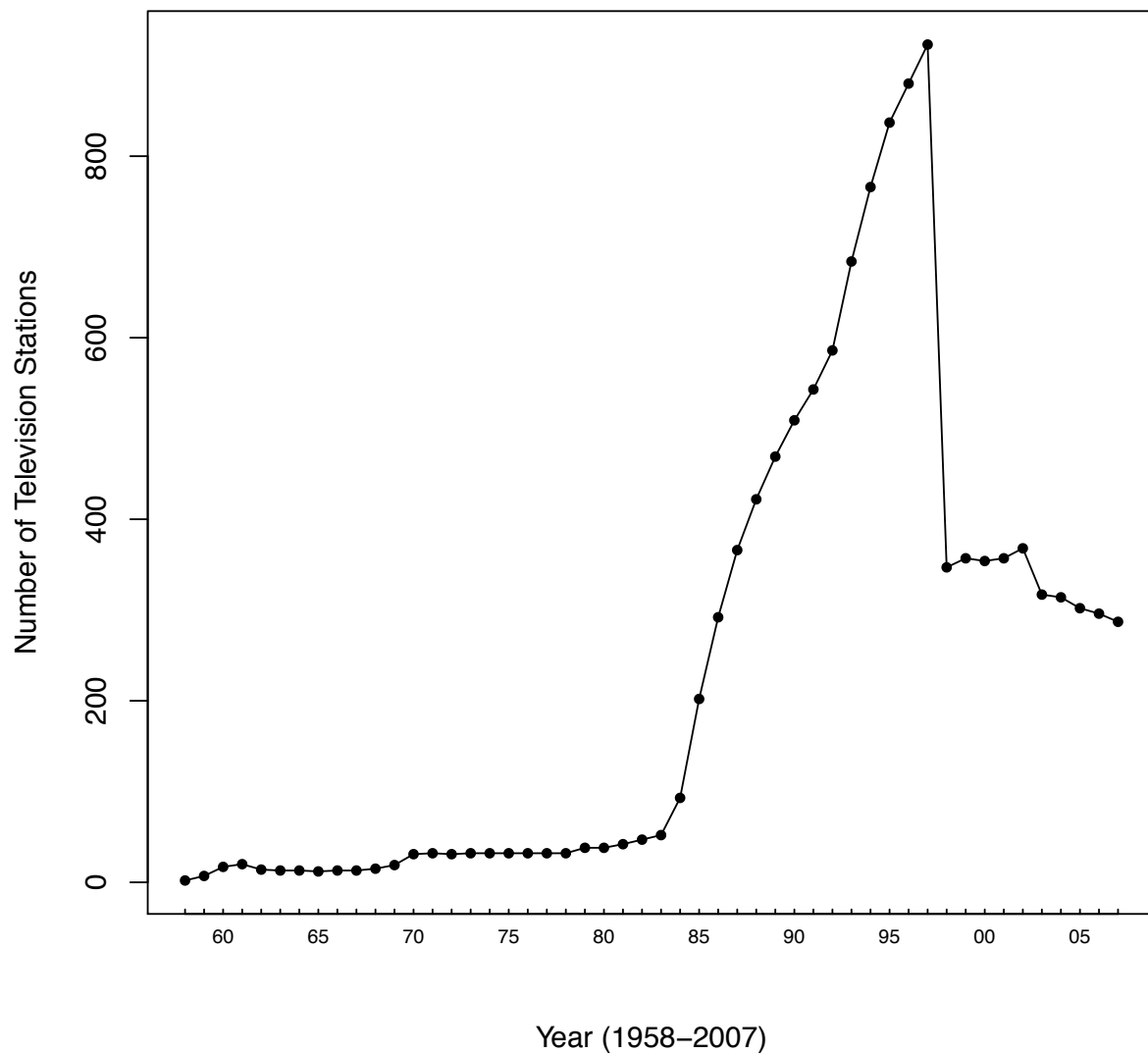
<sup>27</sup> 中共中央发出的 1983 年 37 号文件，正式批准《关于广播电视工作的汇报提纲》。

<sup>28</sup> 国发办 [1999] 82 号文件

<sup>29</sup> This is according to the annual Report on Radio, Film, and Television Development in China 中国广播电影电视发展报告 (2013), published by China Communication Research Center, affiliated with the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television, available at [http://www.cnr.cn/gundong/201307/t20130704\\_512976177.shtml](http://www.cnr.cn/gundong/201307/t20130704_512976177.shtml)

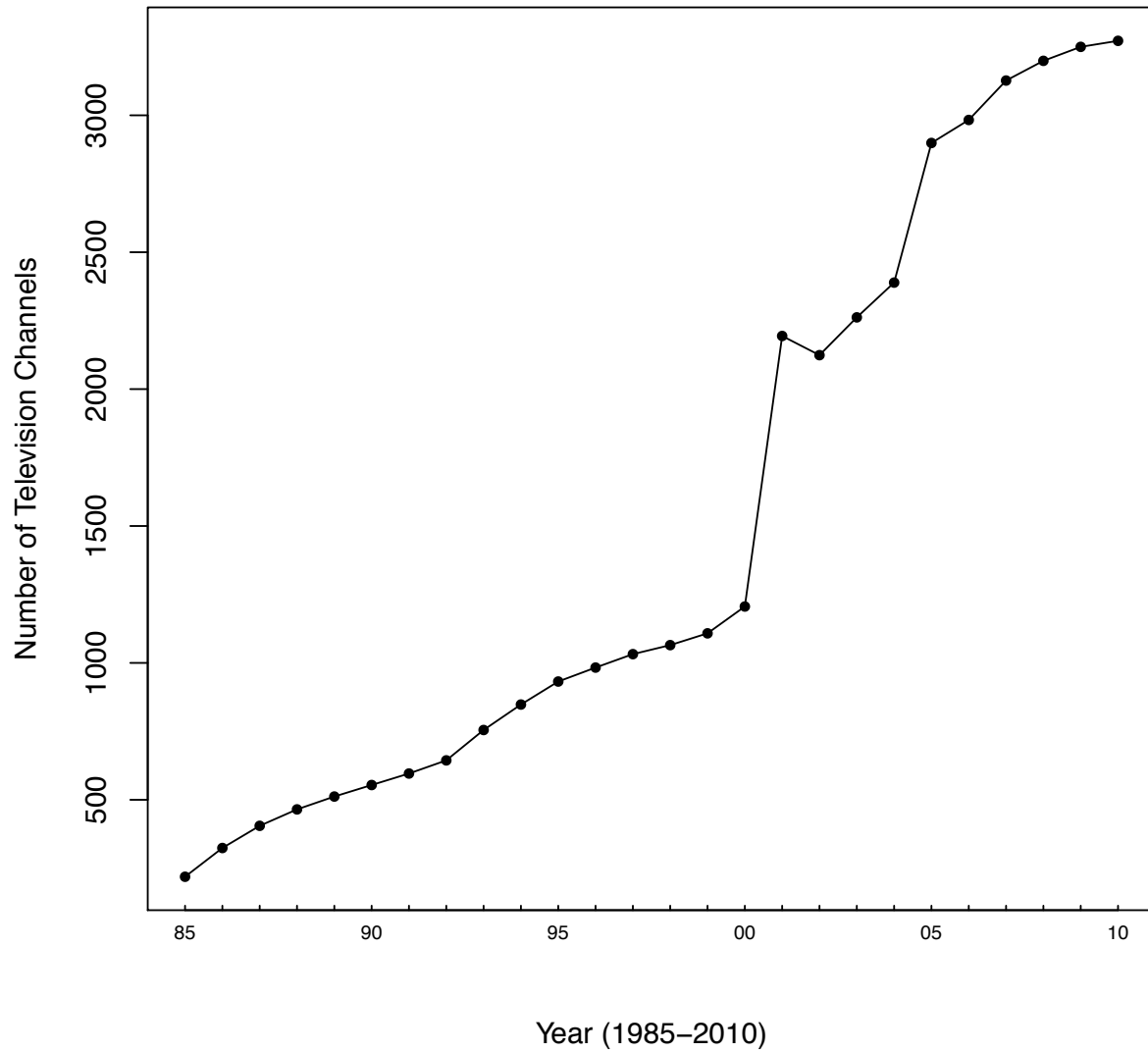
2004, the climbing number of television channels with a higher speed after 2004 implies mounting competition.

**Figure 3.3 Number of Television Stations in China (1958-2007)**



Source: China Statistical Yearbook, accessed through China Data Online

**Figure 3.4 Number of Television Channels in China (1985-2010)**



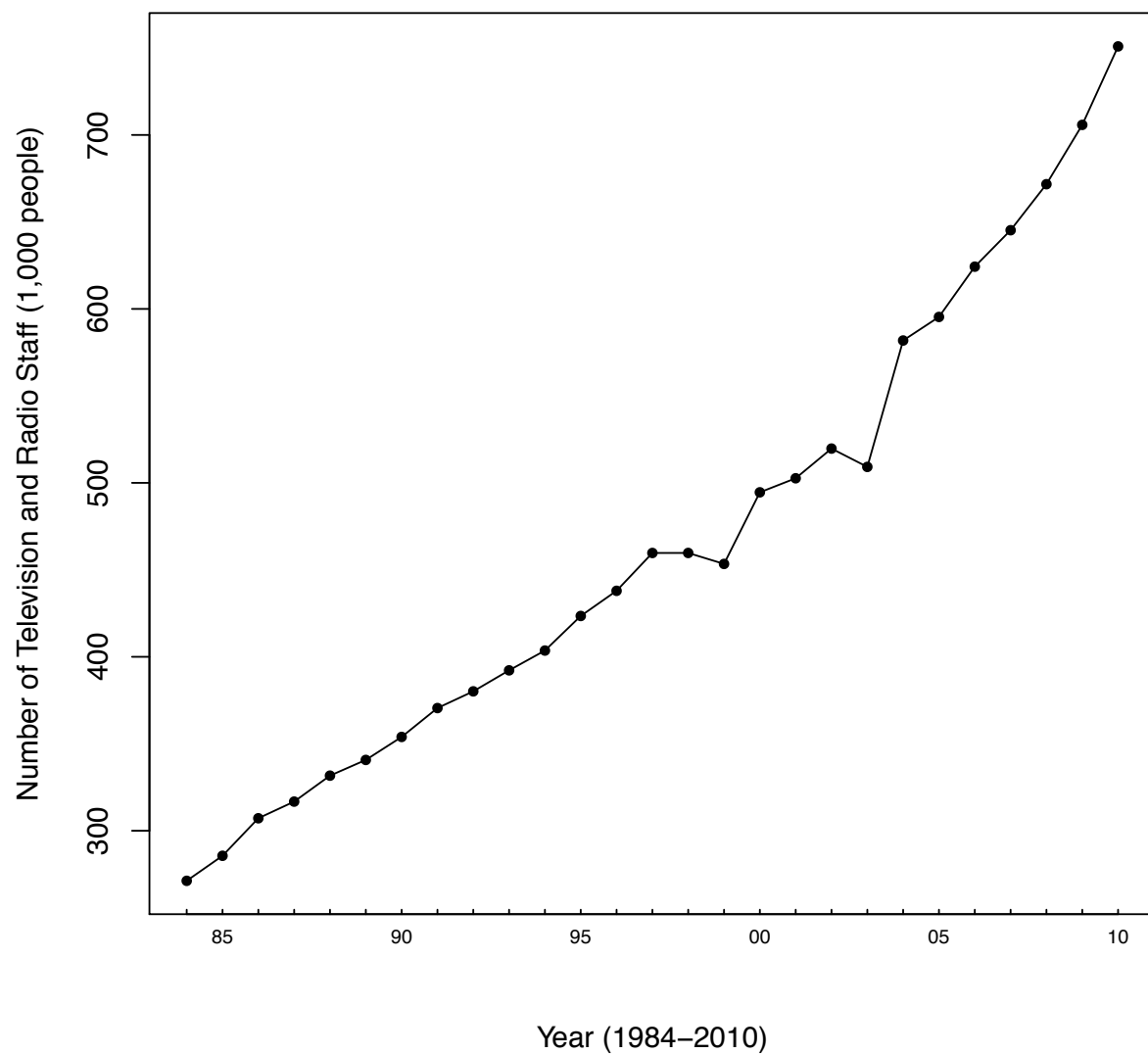
Source: China Statistical Yearbook, accessed through China Data Online

Another indicator of the intense competition in the television market is the growing number of staff working at television stations. Although the data from China Statistical Yearbook combines the staff members working at both television and radio stations, Figure 3.5



suggests a steadily growing number of staff working at television stations, an important sign of growing business for Chinese television stations.

**Figure 3.5 Number of Television and Radio Staff in China (1984-2010)**



Source: China Statistical Yearbook, accessed through China Data Online

Indeed, an important consequence of media marketization is increased competition among media outlets. Research has found that the majority of journalists in Guangzhou, a major city in southern China, felt constrained by audience preferences because news organizations place emphasis on increasing revenue (Lin 2010). Criticism of local governments and policies being one type of news that is proven to attract audience and readers and thus to generate advertising revenues, journalists have great incentives to pursue critical reporting while being careful not to cross the generally ambiguous line set by the party-state. Next, this chapter specifies several techniques commonly used by journalists to push for critical reporting while being under various political constraints, in order to increase ratings or circulation for greater profits.

\*\*\*

Some of these techniques are shared by all kinds of journalists working at television stations, newspapers, and online news portals, while other techniques are unique to different news outlets. First, television producers may use positive follow-up reports to balance the political criticism in the initial report. In the follow-up reports usually aired on the following day of the initial critical reports, correction by relevant government agencies and officials or problems being successfully resolved is emphasized. In other words, the follow-up reports generally end in a positive tone, stressing positive results of originally negative cases.

Second, television producers and newspaper editors may choose to report negative news at lower administrative levels. In China, each newspaper has to be sponsored by a government agency. The administrative level of the sponsoring government agency thus decides the administrative level of the newspaper. The situation is similar for television stations, as specified above. Due to the administrative level of the news outlets, journalists may have more negotiating

power when reporting on local officials' wrongdoings or incompetency at lower administrative levels. This is because each news outlet is supervised by propaganda departments at corresponding administrative levels. Therefore, if local officials at lower administrative levels are dissatisfied at reports done by news outlets at higher administrative levels, the lower-level officials have to resort to propaganda departments at higher levels in order to place pressure on the news outlet to retract reports. This indirect "complaining" process provides leeway for higher-level news outlets to broadcast or publish critical reports on lower-level governments and officials.

Third, television producers and newspaper editors may choose to report on negative news that has already been widely discussed online, especially on Chinese social media sites. In fact, this has been extensively used by both television and newspaper journalists to make an argument for critical reporting, should their reports be questioned by political authorities.

Finally, online news portal executives may bribe middle-level censors to guarantee lighter punishment should any of their reports be deemed as crossing the red line. As revealed by one of my interviewees who formerly worked at a major online news portal as a senior editor, executives of that online news portal had regularly sent gift cards worth as much as 1 million Chinese yuan (about 170,000 USD) to middle-level censors at Beijing Internet Management Office and the Propaganda Department of the CCP Committee at the Beijing Municipality. However, under the current censorship system, this will not guarantee publication of critical reporting without consequences. What this does, instead, is to ensure that the punishment for the online news portals will be lighter when critical reports are published. Generally, the punishments for online news portals can be fine, retracting reports, demoting editors, or even jail time for journalists. If the punishment can be fine instead of retracting reports, for example, then

the space for critical reporting is actually pushed back. Therefore, bribing middle-level censors can sometimes ensure punishment at a lighter level.

Another important consequence that results from market competition is that the function of the news media is being partially transformed in authoritarian China. Specifically, the news media, especially local television news shows, have gradually developed the function of “helping ordinary people solve problems,” 帮老百姓解决问题 which essentially helps local governments provide public goods. In this way, the local news television stations have formed a cooperative relationship with local governments, and at the same time ensured the possibility for critical reporting within certain limits. This will be discussed in detail in the last section of this chapter.

This is not to say, however, that critical reporting at local levels is prevalent and easy. In fact, there are two important features of such news production that we need to recognize. First, even though news professionals have their own ways of dealing with government officials, when it comes to critical reporting, these techniques do not always work and the space for critical reporting does not stay the same. Second, the level of criticism, in terms of both quantity and intensity, varies constantly, depending on the negotiation between the news organizations and the local governments.

Next, this chapter uses an in-depth case study of a popular nightly news show, *Attention*, aired on Yangzhou television news channel, a municipal level television station, to illustrate the techniques used by television news professionals to broadcast critical news stories. The analysis consists of a quantitative content analysis of a segment of *Attention*, and a qualitative examination of the news production process.

## **The Most Popular Nightly News Show *Attention* in Yangzhou**

Yangzhou Television Station (YTS) is the research site where I stayed for a month in the summer of 2013 to conduct semi-structured interviews and direct observation. I observed journalists and the news production process by staying in the journalists' shared offices and following them when they went out to do interviews and shoot video footage. This is non-participant direct observation. Besides, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with journalists and producers working at YTS's most popular nightly news show, *Attention*.

As a municipal level television station, YTS has a number of news shows broadcast on its three channels. The main channel is Yangzhou Television News Channel. The most popular news shows are all broadcast on this channel. Other channels include Yangzhou Television City Channel and Life Channel. All channels launched by YTS are local channels, that is, audiences from regions outside of the municipality are not able to receive YTS channels. Since each municipality typically only has one television station, such municipal television station usually possesses a monopolistic position in terms of local news reporting, because it is the only municipal television news outlet that reports local news. The only exception is in capital cities where provincial-level and municipal-level televisions stations essentially focus on the same audience market. In other words, the jurisdiction of news reporting for municipal-level television stations resembles that of municipal governments. However, this does not mean less competition for municipal-level television news shows. In fact, there is usually intense competition among the news shows from the same or different channels within a municipal television station. In other words, internal competition may be intense.

*Attention* is seen as an old brand of YTS News Channel. *Attention* was launched in 2001, a time when television life news shows just started to draw audience attention. Thus, *Attention*

had gone through a period of high ratings and popularity. However, as with many other television life news shows, starting from the mid-2000s, *Attention*'s rating has been dropping, and there seems to be a consensus among scholars and journalists alike that television life news shows have encountered a bottleneck. The audiences have grown tired of news stories that often focus on street fights and gossip, that is, sensational stories with few social implications. But there does not seem to be a solution for such a bottleneck yet. The producer of *Attention* is thus under pressure to not only keep on air this news show that is seen as an old brand for local news, but also to increase ratings, generate advertising revenues, and revive the intimate relationship that this show once had with the audience. In fact, during my visit at YTS, I found that there were two books on each journalist's desk: *What We Can Learn from Steve Jobs' Innovation* and *Good Employees Dispense Positive Energy*. Both books are management titles targeting private businesses, with the aim to generate profits. I asked a journalist why everybody has the exact same two books. He said that reading and understanding these books were part of the evaluation for journalists, and they had to pass an exam based on those books along with official ideologies such as Marxist-Leninist news and propaganda theory. This suggests the prioritized status of profits in the management process at the television station. Indeed, the producer of *Attention* admits that ratings are one of the most important standards to evaluate a show; sometimes it can even decide whether a show could stay on air. Next, I use the results from content analyzing a segment of *Attention* to examine the trend of critical reporting as broadcast on television. This is followed by a qualitative analysis of the news production process that includes finding news sources, conducting interviews, and shooting video footage. The qualitative analysis illustrates the techniques journalists use to broadcast critical stories as a result of media market competition, as well as the obstacles they have encountered.

*A content analysis of the “supervision by public opinion” segment*

During the 30-minute nightly news show *Attention*, a segment named “Nightly Roll Call” is exclusively devoted to “supervision by public opinion,” that is, critical reporting on local governments and officials, businesses, and ordinary individuals. “Supervision by public opinion” is an official term first mentioned in 1987 in the *Report to the Thirteenth Party Congress*, where then General Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang stated that “we should use all kinds of modernized news and propaganda tools to increase reporting on government and Party affairs, let supervision by public opinion play a role, support the mass criticizing weaknesses and wrongdoings in our work, and struggle against bureaucracy and other kinds of unhealthy tendencies.”<sup>30</sup> (Zhao 1987) During the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1992, it was stated in the report that “we should emphasize the supervision by public opinion function of the news media, complete the supervisory mechanism, and put state bureaus and officials at all levels under effective supervision.”<sup>31</sup> (Jiang 1992) Another five years later, in 1997, the notion of “supervision by public opinion” was further developed and integrated with other forms of supervision that the CCP sees as beneficial to its legitimacy and political rule. It was stated in the *Report to the Fifteenth Party Congress* that “we should integrate intra-Party supervision, supervision by law, and supervision by masses, in order to let supervision by public opinion play a bigger role.”<sup>32</sup> (Jiang 1997) Legally, “supervision by public opinion” became part of the *Regulations on Chinese Communist Party Intra-Party Supervision (Trial)* implemented in 2004. In Article 33<sup>33</sup>, it was stated “under the leadership of the CCP and according to relevant rules and procedures, news media should play the role of supervision by public opinion through either internal or

---

<sup>30</sup> This report is available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64566/65447/4526368.html>

<sup>31</sup> This report is available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64567/65446/4526308.html>

<sup>32</sup> This report is available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64568/65445/4526285.html>

<sup>33</sup> The full text of the regulation is available here: <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/1026/2344222.html>

public reports. Departments and cadres at all levels should emphasize and support supervision by public opinion, listen to criticisms and suggestions, and improve their work.” The major form of “supervision by public opinion” exercised by the news media is investigative reporting.

Investigative reporting has its ebbs and flows. Around the year of 2003 is a small peak for investigative reporting in China, and the major targets of investigative reporting are government agencies, public policies, and business powers (Zhan 2007, 2).

As the current Chinese leadership came to power in November 2012 during the Eighteenth Party Congress, “supervision by public opinion” has seen renewed support from the party-state. After taking over power as the General Party Secretary and the State President, Xi Jinping launched a “Mass Line Education and Practice” campaign in 2013, with the aim to discipline Party members, improve the governing capability of the CCP, and to increase the popularity of the CCP among the public. The notion of mass line is an important component of Mao Zedong Thought. The tenet of mass line is “everything is for the mass; everything relies on the mass; from the mass, and to the mass.” Therefore, the creation of policy should incorporate the interests of the mass; the implementation of policy should rely on the mass. In the year of 2013, one of the biggest enemies of mass line is corruption by Party members, seen as not only being away from the mass, but also betraying the interests of the mass. Under such circumstances, “supervision by public opinion” was reemphasized to facilitate effective practice of mass line. For example, Party papers such as *China Youth Daily* published an opinion-editorial<sup>34</sup> arguing the importance of “supervision by public opinion” in facilitating the “Mass Line Education and Practice” campaign. The official Xinhua news agency published an

---

<sup>34</sup> The opinion-editorial was published on December 3, 2013, and can be accessed at [http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2013-12/03/nw.D110000zgqnb\\_20131203\\_4-02.htm](http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2013-12/03/nw.D110000zgqnb_20131203_4-02.htm)



editorial<sup>35</sup> arguing that “supervision by public opinion is positive energy” that can push all forces in society toward progress.

At a deeper level, the word “supervision” in Chinese has a natural connotation that the supervised may be criticized for any negligence, incompetence, or wrongdoings. When incorporated into the official reports of the CCP, “supervision” implies an attitude that the Party, the supposed leader, is willing to stand on the side of the mass and listen to their suggestions and criticisms. More importantly, “supervision” implies that the basic rules are still set by the CCP. The mass can only *supervise* according to existing laws and regulations, and they do not make the laws and regulations. Therefore, the main function of “supervision by public opinion,” as understood by the CCP in its *Regulations on Chinese Communist Party Intra-Party Supervision (Trial)*, is to uncover corruption cases involving officials and cadres. In this way, the party-state can benefit from “supervision by public opinion” in the sense that such supervision may help discover problems before problems escalate into conflicts. On the other hand, however, such a supervisory mechanism does risk the CCP’s political rule, since too many corruption cases may erode the very legitimacy of the CCP and public confidence in its governing capability. Therefore, the scope and depth of such supervision are often limited. For example, there have not been investigative reports uncovering corruption cases involving officials above the provincial level without the central leadership having decided to punish certain high-level officials.

Despite the limitations of “supervision by public opinion,” a slogan that has not been institutionalized or systematically practiced, it reflects the intention of the Chinese party-state to use the news media and the public to *indirectly* supervise government branches and officials. From an institutional perspective, this practice has its counterpart in established democracies.

---

<sup>35</sup> The editorial was published on July 16, 2013, and can be accessed at [http://news.xinhuanet.com/zg/jx/2013-07/16/c\\_132544963.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/zg/jx/2013-07/16/c_132544963.htm)

McCubbins and Schwartz (1984) use the term “fire alarms oversight” to refer to the practice that the United States Congress establishes rules, procedures and informal practices to enable citizens and interest groups to supervise and oversee the executive branch in cases of violating congressional goals. Similarly, through the news media, the Chinese party-state can also exercise supervision and control over its subordinate government branches and officials. In this way, the party-state shifts the monitoring cost to the news media and citizens. In fact, such shift of monitoring cost by the party-state happens not only with the news media, but also with other institutional instruments such as direct village elections in rural China (Kennedy 2007).

\*\*\*

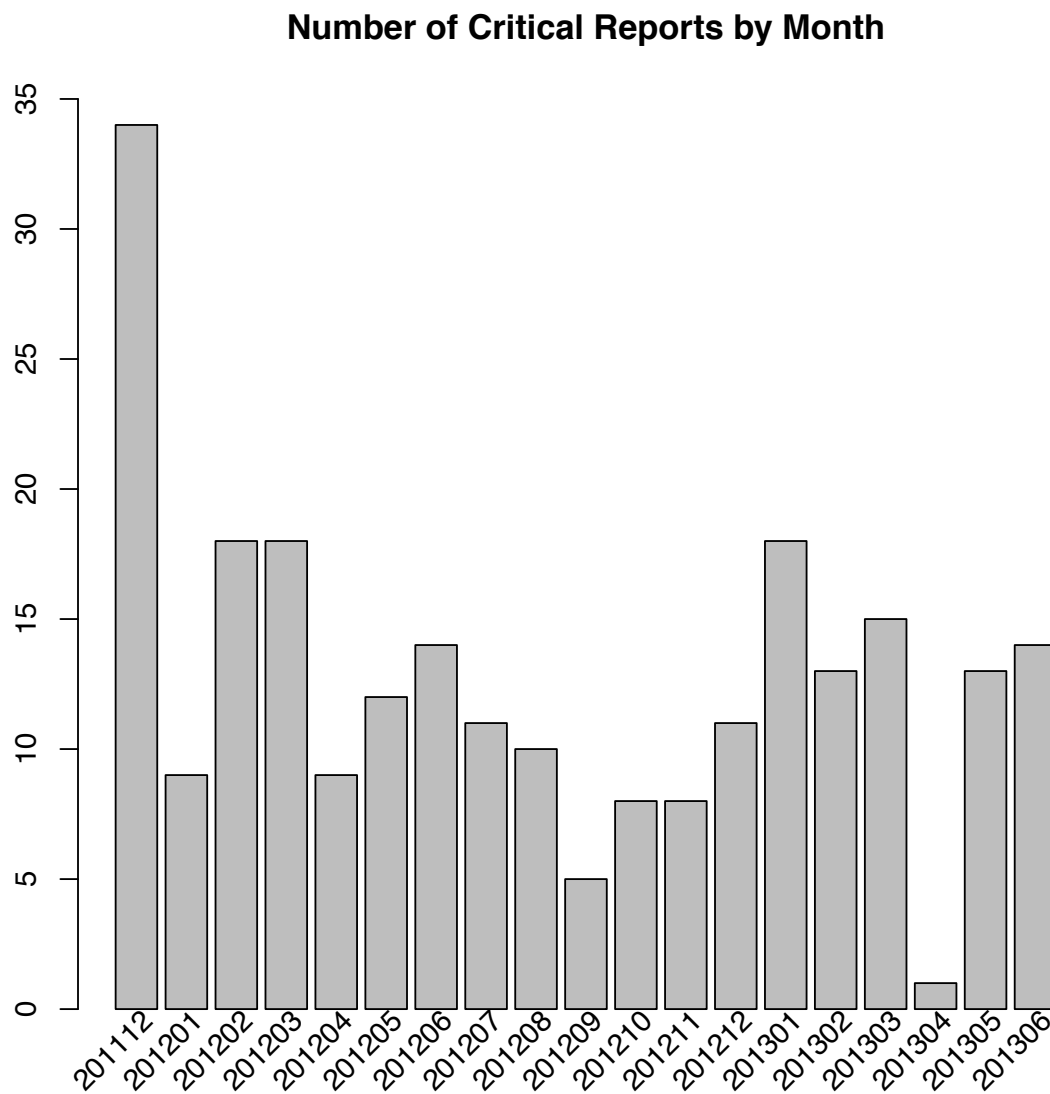
The party-state’s intention to use the news media is met with the strong need of the news media to earn profits through increase in ratings or circulation, a direct result of media marketization. A segment of *Attention* – “Nightly Roll Call” – was created with the intention to use “supervision by public opinion” in order to increase ratings. However, with the delicate political nature of the notion of “supervision by public opinion,” the producer told me that they were not able to air this segment on a daily basis. In fact, the frequency of this segment depends on the political environment. During the time of important political or social events, this segment may have to stop airing. For example, in April of 2013, due to a local festival, it was an informal agreement between journalists and the Yangzhou government that positive news should occupy the majority of airtime or newspaper pages. As a result, “Nightly Roll Call” was only aired once during the whole month of April. This strongly suggests that “supervision by public opinion” has not been institutionalized, although journalists sometimes can make use of this notion to push for more critical reporting, as will be discussed in the qualitative analysis section. Next, I analyze the results of content analyzing “Nightly Roll Call” from December 2011 to June 2013. This

segment was created and first aired in December 2011. Thus, we can glean the trend, if any, of critical reporting at this municipal level television station.

There are a total of 241 reports in the segment of “Nightly Roll Call” from December 2011 to June 2013. The producer of the show told me that in this segment, the anchor would call out the names of the government agencies/businesses/individuals that are criticized, hence the name of the section. In each episode of this nightly news show, “Nightly Roll Call” only focuses on one news story, so there is always only one government agency/business/individual that is called out each day. Based on this, each report is coded by (1) whether the subject that is called out is a government agency, a business, or an individual; (2) how many reports per month there are in the above-mentioned three categories.

Figure 3.6 shows that the number of critical reports decreased over time, and stabilized at around 13 reports per month. However, there are two outliers, September 2012 and April 2013. There were only 5 reports in September 2012 and 1 report in April 2013. The reason for such a sharp decline in the number of critical reports is political. The main industry of Yangzhou is tourism. In fact, this municipality is famous for its historical sites. As a result, the municipal government places great importance on tourism, and launches tourist festivals from time to time in order to attract tourists nationwide. September 2012 and April 2013 are the two months when the municipal government launched two tourist festivals. Therefore, as the producer told me, during these two months, the number of critical reports sharply declined. In addition, there is a ditch in the number of critical reports from September to November 2012. This is likely due to the Eighteenth Party Congress, a time when Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang were selected as the new generation of Chinese leaders. During such a politically sensitive time, critical reports needed to tone down. This is the influence from national politics.

**Figure 3.6 Number of Critical Reports in “Nightly Roll Call” by Month**

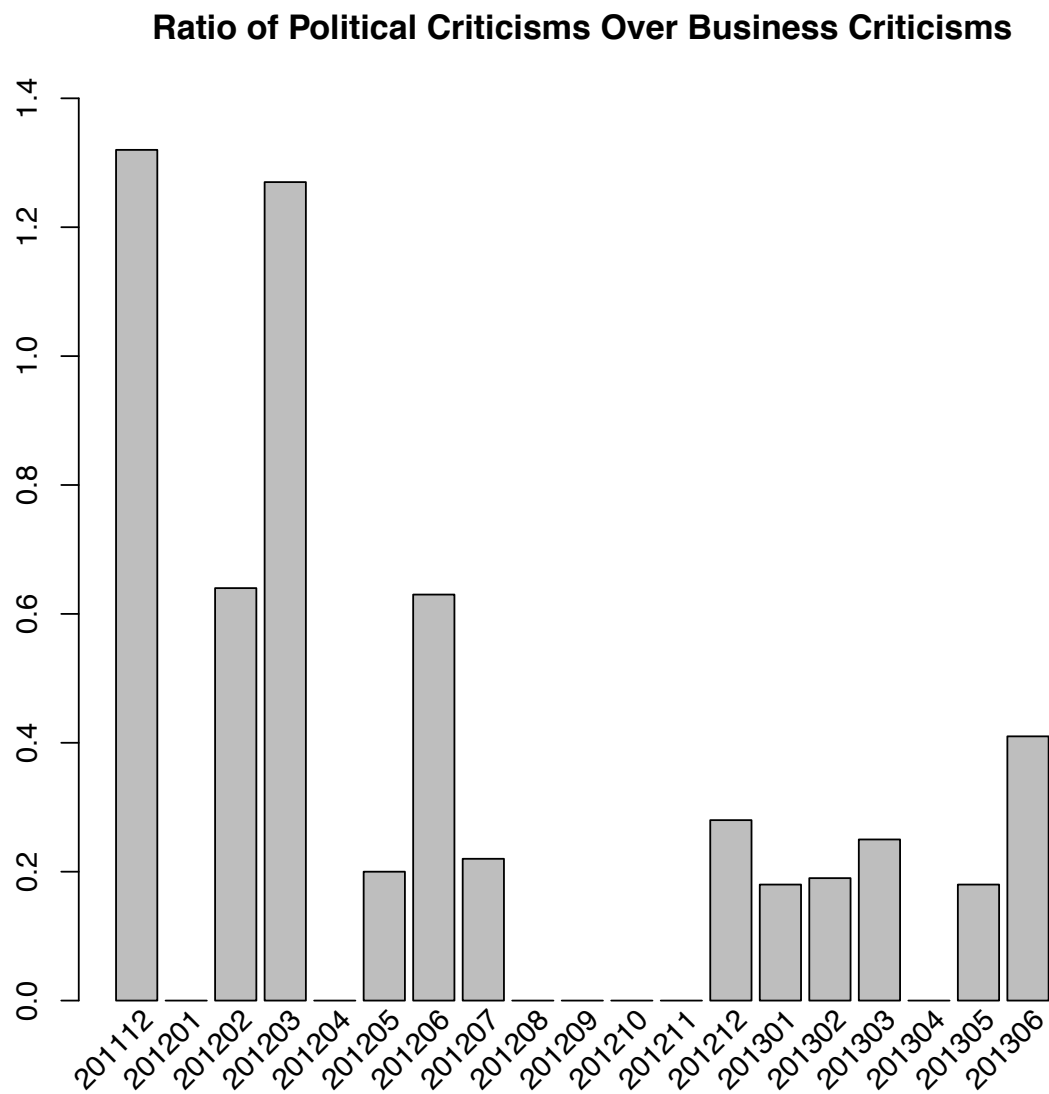


Note: The y-axis shows the frequency of critical reports.

Source: author's collection of news scripts.

Figure 3.7 describes the ratio of criticisms of government agencies and officials over criticisms of businesses. A ratio above 1 means there were more political criticisms than business criticisms. While in December 2011 and March 2012 there were more political criticisms than business criticisms, the situation was reversed since March 2012. In 7 out of the 19 months, there was no political criticism at all. This suggests shrinking space for political criticism over time. During my fieldwork, some television journalists commented that it has become more difficult to do politically critical news. As mentioned earlier, for a municipal level television station like Yangzhou television, journalists can only report on local news, that is, within the jurisdiction of the municipality. A direct result of this is that there are only so many government agencies and officials. Critical reporting for the first time may be negotiated and allowed, but not so easy for the second or the third time. For example, while government agency X may be criticized on local television news due to a dispute between an average citizen and an official working at the agency, television journalists may not be received in a friendly manner the next time they try to enter that agency building and conduct interviews. In fact, a journalist told me that he was on an unofficial blacklist of a local health insurance bureau. Whenever the security guard outside of the bureau building sees him, he would be blocked from shooting video footage or conducting any interviews before he could even enter the building. In other words, because television journalists can only report on local affairs, and the local government personnel tend to be stable, initial news criticism may lead to rejection and more difficulty in critical reporting for the second or the third time.

**Figure 3.7 Ratio of Political Criticisms Over Business Criticisms**



Source: author's collection of news scripts.

Overall, from the content analysis of the “Nightly Roll Call” segment of *Attention*, we can conclude that criticisms stay at local levels. More specifically, since the television station is at the municipal level, the government agencies and officials that this show has criticized were only at administrative levels below the municipal level, such as district, county, township, and village levels. This is decided by the nature of the television station. As mentioned earlier, since all television stations in China are state-owned and thus strictly controlled, when political leaders from the municipal level make phone calls or issue directives (打招呼) to prevent news stories from being broadcast, journalists have no other choice but to terminate the reports. Sometimes, television journalists even have to cancel the trip to go out and conduct interviews because some official has called the television station, asking to kill the report. If critical reports were deemed as crossing the line by political leaders after broadcast, television station leaders and producers may be called over to attend a “meeting” (被叫去开会), where they will be “criticized and educated” for their inappropriate reporting. The producer of *Attention* told me that once he and several other high-level television station leaders were called over by the propaganda department of the CCP committee at the Yangzhou municipal level to be “criticized and educated,” because the news show has broadcast a report, pointing out that some officials have used government cars for private trips, even though none of the officials’ names were called out. Therefore, at the lowest level television station in China, there can be various obstacles for critical reporting before, during, and after the news production process.

However, market competition, specifically the pursuit of ratings and advertising revenues in this case, can drive producers and journalists to take a risk and test the red line for critical reporting. Of course, these are seasoned news professionals who have built their careers in the Chinese media environment. As a result, it is highly unlikely that they would put forward critical

reports that directly challenge the CCP rule or the regime, as that would not only end their professional careers, but also threaten the safety of themselves and their families. Given this, the “risky” critical reports may not be risky at all from a western journalistic point of view. Indeed, the level of criticism and riskiness is fundamentally comparative. In this case, although it is very difficult to quantify or even just specify where to draw the line of riskiness, seasoned news professionals have their own senses.

### *Navigating an uncharted territory*

The producer of *Attention* joined the staff of the show in 2011 with the ambition to restore and keep the dominating status of the show in the television market in the municipality. A key, if not the only, indicator of such a status is rating, which is directly related to advertising revenue. Indeed, if the ratings of the show were below expectation, everyone working on the show would lose a portion of his or her bonus as punishment. The producer also has quite a say in deciding the amount of bonus for each journalist working for the show. Specifically, the producer gives a grade for each report produced by each journalist, just like a teacher would give a point grade for each student. Every month, all grades will be summed up and an average will be taken as an overall grade for the journalists. Based on the overall monthly grades, there will be a ranking list for all the journalists. In fact, such ranking lists are posted publicly on the wall of the office the journalists share, just like the situation where some teachers would post the ranking of exam grades in Chinese schools. Therefore, both the overall grades and the amount of bonuses are publicly available for all the journalists. This, according to the producer, was meant to be a motivation and incentive for the journalists to work harder. When those journalists who lagged behind saw the ranking and the difference in bonuses, they would try harder next time and produce better reports.



So what are the criteria that the producer uses to grade each report? There are two levels of grading. First, the report has to meet the basic requirements such as no grammar mistakes in news scripts. These also include regular professional codes such as protecting privacy of citizens by blurring informants' faces and no mistakes in factual information such as name and location. Second, the report has to meet audience's tastes, such as capturing a unique perspective to a news story that would make a seemingly idiosyncratic incident encompass broad social implications. For example, the news show received a hotline call during my fieldwork about an old lady buying expensive fake medicine after being deceived by frauds. The journalist assigned with this story decided to make this a lesson for all seniors in the city, easy targets of medicine frauds, to always be cautious when being approached by strangers about medical products. Stories that report local abuses and help citizens generate a loyal audience. Making use of 3-D animation technology on television, for another example, can help recount incidents more effectively and at the same time attract audience's attention.

Based on these grading criteria, aspirational journalists, certainly not all journalists, have the incentive to report on news stories critical of government officials, as disputes between citizens and government officials do happen, sometimes quite often, and these disputes generate high ratings. I followed a journalist named Zhang for a week, observing his day-to-day news production activities. He holds the belief that news should serve ordinary people, and function like a bridge between the government and the people. He is generally very concerned with the "vulnerable social groups" such as migrant workers and seniors. He once told me he would like to help as many people as he could by reporting on their stories. "Sometimes," he said, "I think the platform of my television station is too small for me to help more people." What he was

referring to was that television stations at the provincial or central levels, for example, have more space for critical reporting because of their higher administrative levels.

During his career, Zhang once became an unwelcome guest of a district government under the municipality of Yangzhou. Earlier in 2013, Zhang used a hidden camera to investigate an accusation that a deputy chief of the district government beat a pregnant woman who was his staff member. When Zhang went to the district government for the first time to investigate the case, nobody admitted that it was the deputy chief who beat the woman. Instead, Zhang was told that it was a staff member who was temporarily hired that beat the woman. However, through meticulous investigation, Zhang found that this purported temporarily hired staff member was actually the deputy chief. After the report was broadcast on television, Zhang has been on the unofficial blacklist and was not allowed to be anywhere near the district government building again. This case shows that even though critical reporting comes with a moderate price, aspirational journalists have the incentive to test and sometimes push the boundaries of criticism.

Facing obstacles, journalists have used a number of techniques to push for critical reporting. Building on the notion of “supervision by public opinion” that was written into official Party documents, journalists developed the concept “the right to information” 知情权 as a common bargain chip to press for more information, especially from government officials on potentially negative stories. The emphasis was that ordinary citizens have the right to know what has happened, as government officials are supposed to serve the people. For example, Zhang was working on a story from a hotline call that an ordinary worker was not able to acquire the entitled healthcare insurance card from the healthcare insurance bureau. There was a change of policy regarding public healthcare insurance, and according to the new policy, this worker should be able to get his healthcare insurance. However, due to the complexity of the policy change, the

official who dealt with this case refused to issue the insurance card. In fact, this worker had been trying for nine years just to get an insurance card, but never succeeded. Zhang went to the healthcare insurance bureau together with this worker, and the case was resolved in 20 minutes. Zhang said the key to the fast solution in this case was that he did not try to understand or explain the complex policy change. He instead pointed to the unhelpful attitude that the official had when dealing with the case. Zhang said, as a public servant, he or she should at least let the average citizens know what the policy was. This is the citizens' right to information. After the story was broadcast, the leader from the bureau called *Attention* and said he already criticized and educated the official. In this case, choosing which perspective to report on a story is important. To focus on the unhelpful attitude of the official certainly made it easier for journalists to criticize government officials, and at the same time help ordinary citizens solve problems.

This technique can also be understood with the framework of “rightful resistance” (O'Brien and Li 2006). “Serving the people” is the slogan that was inscribed in the stone at the doorway of Zhongnanhai, the place where the highest leadership of the CCP reside. The recently revived concept of “mass line” continues to show the party-state's intention of making use of the rhetoric that the party serves the people in order to gain legitimacy and support. Journalists, out of the need to produce reports that the audience has an interest in watching, make use of such rhetoric to hold government officials responsible through critical reporting. Of course, such criticisms tend to stay at the margin, as the case study above shows. Zhang did not criticize the complex policy at all, but only focused on the official's problematic attitude. Nevertheless, this technique has enabled journalists to report on negative stories of government officials. Next, this chapter uses specific examples from direct observation to document and analyze the news

production process of *Attention*. These examples illustrate the techniques journalists have used as well as the challenges they have faced when producing critical news.

*Case 1 - Feeling Agitated: A young female migrant worker and her overdue insurance benefits*

It was a hotline phone call. Zhang received this assignment. A young female migrant worker, who migrated from a rural township under the administration of Yangzhou municipality to work in an urban district of Yangzhou, called *Attention* in the hope that the journalists would help her take back the overdue retirement plan benefits she believed she was entitled to. In the phone call, she detailed the policy, as she understood it, that her employer, which was a small business, should have paid 20% of the cost of the retirement plan. However, her employer only paid 18%, and she was asked to pay the 2% difference at the retirement bureau of Yangzhou. She thus demanded that the 2% difference be paid back to her from the retirement bureau.

As a migrant worker who moved from rural towns to urban cities, the change in self-identity can be paramount. For a young migrant worker, the change can be even more overwhelming. When Zhang called her and set up a time to meet outside of the retirement bureau, she briefly recounted the story and her grievance. During this, Zhang was shooting video footage while doing the interview, asking her questions to make it a conversation. Zhang promised to blur her face to conceal her identity if broadcast on television. During the interview, her voice was trembling, and I could see her holding back tears in her eyes. For young migrant workers like her, they rely on their own capability and diligence to find employment in the cities. The self-reliant social mobility from rural towns to urban cities also means they are entitled to the various benefits that urbanites enjoy. Mistreatment of any sort is likely to arouse the feeling that they are unfairly treated, and their hard work is denied to a certain extent. Such grievances can be overwhelming for individuals that are on the margins of the rapidly modernizing society.

After hearing her account of what happened, Zhang obviously felt agitated and said, “Let’s go inside and take the 2% back!”

When we went inside, the officials at the bureau were very unfriendly, if not hostile. At the moment they saw the camera in Zhang’s hand, they instantly knew Zhang was a television journalist. As a result, the officials initially said they had no comments and asked us to leave. Physically, Zhang kept a distance of about two meters from the desks where the officials sat. Seeing that the conversation was going nowhere, Zhang switched to a mild tone, and said he was there just to solve the problem, not to look for trouble. He just wanted to know what the policy was and whether there was any mistake in the handling of this case. These accounts play into the notion of “the right to know,” as Zhang told me before, which is hard for government officials to shun away from.

Zhang’s approach worked. The request resonated with an official in the room who seems to be a leader, and he started to explain the policy to us. It turned out that because the migrant worker worked for a small business, and small businesses enjoy a reduction of the amount of retirement benefits that they have to pay for their employees. Therefore, the amount of retirement plan her employer needs to pay was indeed 18%. It was unclear, however, who should pay the 2% difference.

Knowing this, we left the office. The migrant worker was disappointed. She said the 2% was around 600 yuan, which was a substantial portion of her monthly salary. This story, however, was not broadcast in the show. The reason, as Zhang told me later, was that audiences may not like such stories where there were no escalated conflicts or information that the majority of the audiences can benefit from.

*Case 2 - Knowing the Limits: Poorly built commodity apartments*

Xu is another veteran journalist in the team who has been working at *Attention* for more than six years. During the day I was observing him, his assignment was quality problems of a commodity apartment.

The wife of the family who owns the apartment called the hotline, and we went to visit the apartment. The wife showed us around the two-story apartment where there were cracks, some minor, some major, on the walls of almost every room. She told us she had contacted the developer who had come to try to fix the problem, but the cracks showed again before long. After this, she had resorted to the Association of Consumer Protection, which is an official social organization with limited administrative power, but also ended up in vain. She felt she was cheated by the developer. She said her family has invested almost everything into this apartment. She is a housewife, and her husband is only a mid-level manager at a shipyard. Their family income was modest, and the apartment was a very expensive purchase for the family. Now she was worried about the safety of the apartment.

After hearing the story, Xu told the wife up front that she should not expect this to be solved. Xu said he had seen many cases like this during the past several years as a journalist, and few were resolved in the end. However, as a routine, Xu called an apartment quality inspector to give an expert examination of the problems leading to the cracks on the walls. The inspector came to the conclusion that these cracks were due to improper construction practices during the time when the apartment building was built. It was very difficult to fix since it would be unrealistic to tear down the whole building.

Then we went to the developers, although without too much hope in finding a possible solution to this problem. Interestingly, in the lobby of the developer's building, there were three

medals that read “credible developer,” awarded by Yangzhou television station in 2009, 2010, and 2011. I asked Xu about potential conflict of interest in reporting the story since YTS obviously has relations with this developer. Xu said that this developer was a major advertisement client of YTS, and this was why it was awarded the medals. Xu said this story may be killed if the developer called high-level leaders in the television station, but that would be beyond his responsibility.

The manager at the developer company refused to be interviewed by Xu. In fact, only receptionists talked to us. After lingering around for 20 minutes, Xu decided that the manager would not talk to him. But the story needs an ending. Xu instead interviewed the wife, during which she said she hoped she and the developer could reach some kind of deal. Xu said this was only for the sake of news production. It was very unlikely that this would lead to a deal satisfactory to both sides.

While we were waiting for the inspector, Xu and I chatted about local television news and reporting on disputes like this. Xu disagrees with the idea that journalists should help ordinary people solve problems. For Xu, journalists should be objective, and should not be involved with either side of the story. News shows that primarily focus on helping people are “pathetic,” because they are not real news. At the same time, this phenomenon shows how incompetent the government can be. Xu said sometimes he would question government officials during interview that “why didn’t you guys pay attention to and solve such problems?” Usually the officials would respond that “Well, nobody told us these problem before.” Xu said this was an annoying answer. If you wait for others to tell you the problems, then what do you do? Shouldn’t you have any responsibilities? Xu was quite critical of government officials. Having said this, however, Xu admitted that journalists tend to take the side of the weak, that is, the

ordinary people when they have disputes with government agencies or officials, or business powers.

Despite the potential conflict of interest since the developer was a major advertisement client of YTS, the story was aired that night. However, as the difficult negotiating process shows, the story ended with no solution for the lady and her family.

*Case 3 – Testy Negotiation: Property disputes involving a local people’s congress representative*

This news story demonstrates that being a journalist can be a highly stressful job. I remember the atmosphere that day between the City Urban Management Bureau 城市管理局 officials (hereafter city officials) and Zhang was so tense, that I was afraid something violent may happen to Zhang and his colleague, and possibly me, too.

This story also came from a hotline phone call. A person complained to *Attention* that his neighbor, a Yangzhou People’s Congress representative, illegally built a sunroom on top of the apartment building and the room blocked sunshine for his apartment. He said city officials had been involved and ruled that it was the representative that violated the regulations, and that the sunshine room should be revised or demolished. However, this representative ignored city officials’ rulings.

When I followed Zhang to the city officials’ office that morning, the city officials were very unfriendly to Zhang and refused to answer any questions from Zhang. One official waved his hands in the air, trying to drive us away while shouting, “Go away!” Zhang was not willing to give up, and tried to talk to him though he didn’t even want to look at Zhang in the eye. At that moment, five or six other city officials approached us, and they were obviously on the same side as the first official, trying to kick us out. The atmosphere was once very tense. After a few



minutes of standoff, Zhang gave up, as he probably did not see any possibility of holding an interview with city officials.

A few minutes later, however, a manager from the City Urban Management Bureau stopped us as we were about to walk out of the building. This manager greeted Zhang and was very friendly. He invited us to a conference room inside the city officials' building, and made us tea. He first asked us why we were there. Zhang told him the dispute and said that as a journalist, he simply wanted to report the truth about the dispute. City officials were involved and played the role of a mediator, so they should have information on this case. The manager said he understood Zhang's needs and would invite another city official to explain the dispute to us, since he was not directly involved in the dispute.

About ten minutes later, the manager brought in three people—an official who's responsible for dealing with the media, and two other officials who were familiar with the case. They told Zhang details of the case, and the atmosphere was generally friendly. In the end, Zhang decided to shoot the video footage where he let the city officials say something about the case, including the agreement that the sunshine room should be revised or demolished.

After the interview was over, in the last minute before we walked out of the city officials' building, the official who was responsible for dealing with the media asked Zhang, "Do you *have* to broadcast this?" Facing this question, as a seasoned journalist, Zhang responded, "Not necessarily." This official then tried to talk Zhang out of reporting this story. At that point, I was not sure whether the effort to prevent the story from being publicized had anything to do with the representative, but it almost seemed obvious that it has to be the case, because city officials really had nothing to lose.

After we finished the business at the city officials' building, it was time for lunch. During lunch, Zhang received a phone call. He answered the call while eating at the table, so I heard the conversation. The call was from somebody who was trying to prevent him from broadcasting the story. After the call, Zhang said, the story was killed. The efforts at the city officials' building where Zhang and his colleague spent a whole morning were all for naught.

### **Transformation of Media Responsibility - Providing Public Goods**

After staying with the journalists at YTS for a month, I found it is difficult not to be involved when you are personally and directly exposed to news stories as they are happening. Many of the stories involve "vulnerable social groups" such as a female migrant worker asking for her entitled benefits or migrant workers working on construction sites asking for their entitled summer heat fees.

Now the party-state faces a number of problems, many of which are direct results of the economic reform. Losers of the reform, or those who did not benefit as much, are the majority. The duration of Chinese authoritarianism is partially a function of the extent to which their grievances are addressed. Under such circumstances, television news has become a venue that people with grievances often resort to, partly because there are many cases where grievances and problems were successfully resolved. For television journalists, some of them prefer such stories partly because audiences like watching such reports. For the party-state, the inability and/or unwillingness of local governments to provide public goods such as infrastructure as well as rule of law is, to a certain degree, mended by the fact that television news programs are taking over some of the functions of the party-state.

In fact, the function of the television news media to help ordinary people solve problems has been so well known among the public that sometimes they treat television news shows as the

authority to turn to when they cannot get their problems solved. During my time at YTS, I found that hotline phone calls were the most important source of news for *Attention*. On June 10, 2013, one phone call was about a road outside a residential complex. A resident was complaining about the poor quality of the road. The staff member who answered the call said that she would write down the information, but it would be up to the producer whether to choose the story. She further explained that this story was not really news. “We are a television news show, not a government bureau.”

This also reflects the bottleneck that television life news faces. In the early 2000s, such a story about a poorly-built road would be broadcast on television immediately. After several years feeding such stories to audience, producers sensed that audience has grown tired of such reports. The producer of *Attention* told me that the criterion to judge a good story for his show was whether the story has implications for the whole society, not just for certain individuals. Even for stories that only involve certain individuals, journalists should try to dig out the underlying social implications so that audience would feel the stories are relevant to them. However, such efforts may sometimes go too far. For example, on June 10, 2013, I followed a journalist named Ting when a breaking news story happened around noon. A gas pipeline in a residential complex was leaking natural gas. For safety concerns, the authority turned down the supply of gas that was supposed to be transported to hundreds of households in the complex. The pipeline was leaking because a construction team repairing the road in the complex accidentally broke the pipeline when digging under the ground. When Ting and I arrived at the site of the incident, the repair team had already arrived. After Ting got the video footage and interviewed several people on site about what happened, we went back to the television station. In the early afternoon, Ting wrote up the script to match the video footage, and then submitted it for the producer to review and

revise. In the late afternoon, Ting received the revised script, after which he went to the video editing room to edit the footage, the last stage of news production. While editing the footage, Ting complained to me that the producer has changed the script too much that it was difficult for him to match the script with the picture. Moreover, originally Ting wrote, “The gas leak has affected hundreds of households nearby.” But the producer changed “hundreds of” into “thousands of.” Ting disputed the number, doubting that there were thousands of households in that complex. However, he told me that the producer always wanted big numbers to create a sensational effect that he believed would attract audience.

Another obstacle for stories that provide public goods comes from government. A quote from a journalist that I became acquainted with summarizes the situation well. “The space for such critical news stories is shrinking as time goes by.” At the beginning of the rise of television life news, life news was not only new for audiences, but also new for government officials. The result was that government officials were not as experienced or sure about how to deal with journalists as they are now. While a journalist may get away with reporting stories of insufficient provision of public goods for the first time, he or she may not be so lucky the next time. After all, government officials and journalists are acquainted with each other, as a city like Yangzhou is not a big one, and there is only one television station.

## **Conclusion**

Most news professionals are under considerable pressure to generate revenues from the news they produce. In other words, they have to find ways to attract audiences and readers. One such way is critical reporting. In an environment where sharp criticisms are rare and social problems are mounting, the public needs to release concern and anger over various problems without directly challenging the party-state. Criticism in news, even only at lower administrative

levels and on non-sensitive issues, occupies a unique niche in the news market. As the high rating of a critical television life news show *Just in Nanjing* and the high circulation rate of a respected liberal newspaper *Southern Weekend* suggest, critical news has a large and loyal following in the public. Based on this, the pressure from market competition may drive news professionals in the direction of producing critical news.

On the other hand, criticism is bound to be challenged by local political authorities, as they have great incentives to present a positive and competent image in front of both the public and their superiors. While the lack of hard-and-fast rules on news content restriction has led to excessive self-censorship (Hassid 2008; Stern and Hassid 2012), it may also create leeway for journalists to negotiate with government officials. Indeed, creative and seasoned journalists have used a number of techniques, as documented in this chapter, to get around obstacles to critical reporting. Having investigated the influence of market forces on critical news, Chapter 4 examines the influence of journalists, including their journalistic orientations and positions in news organizations, in pushing for more space for critical reporting.

## **Chapter 4 Journalistic Fracture: Aspirational News Professionals**

Diversity characterizes journalists in China. Chinese journalists differ from each other on several dimensions, including independence, advocacy (Hassid 2011), and professionalization. These differences partially determine that some journalists tend to be forces pushing for more space of critical reporting than others. Moreover, “journalists’ long-standing quest for press freedom is not purely a result of market pressure.” (He 2000, 600) Therefore, journalistic aspirations constitute an important factor influencing news content, aside from market forces. This chapter analyzes the characteristics of journalists in China through case studies, with a focus on whether and how they actively affect the content and style of critical reporting on television and in newspapers.

### **Journalists for the Party, the Market, and the Profession**

Besides “journalist,” there are several other terms used to refer to journalists, such as “propaganda workers” 宣传工作者, “news workers” 新闻工作者, and “news and propaganda workers” 新闻宣传工作者. The terms “worker” and “propaganda” reflect the roles of journalists in Leninist states. Indeed, according to All-China Journalists Association, the official association for Chinese journalists sponsored by the party-state, the duties of journalists include serving the people, staying loyal to the Party, and keeping correct public opinion guidance. In other words, in the official account of journalism as a profession, the fundamental task is to serve the party-state, rather than reporting the truth. After media marketization, more journalists see the market, i.e. audiences or readers, as the most important entity to serve, especially due to the fact that many news organizations have to earn profits in order to maintain operation. At the same time, although Chinese journalists are trained to follow the official duties and rules, many hold values

that resemble journalistic ideals in democracies with media freedom, which typically includes objectivity of factual information and independence from political and business powers.

Hassid (2011) provides a useful typology of Chinese journalists based on two horizontal dimensions—independence and advocacy. According to this typology, there are four general types of journalists in China: American-style professionals (high on independence and low on advocacy), workaday journalists (low on both dimensions), communist professionals (low on independence and high on advocacy), and advocate professionals (high on both dimensions). During my fieldwork in China, I have interviewed journalists that can be categorized into each of the four types. In the context of this study, Hassid's typology also has implications for journalists' orientation for critical reporting. American-style and advocate professionals may have more aspirations for critical reporting than workaday journalists and communist professionals. However, based on my observation during the fieldwork in north, central, and east China, a third vertical dimension necessary for us to understand whether and how journalists can become forces pushing for more space of critical reporting is missing in the literature. Hassid's two horizontal dimensions are about journalistic characteristics at the individual level, but a more comprehensive understanding of journalistic behaviors cannot ignore contextual factors. Thus the third dimension is the position of journalists in a news organization. The hypothesis is that mid-level editors or producers have the most potential to become forces for critical reporting. Mid-level news professionals refer to those who are in charge of a department in a newspaper, such as the investigative reporting department, or a news show in a television station, such as producers. Mid-level news professionals have fewer responsibilities than high-level leaders in charge of a whole news organization, but they have more decision power over the content of news than entry-level journalists whose jobs are often assigned by mid-level newspaper editors

and television producers. Next, this chapter examines three cases of mid-level news professionals working for television stations and newspapers, detailing exactly how and why these mid-level editors and producers push for criticism. Then this chapter discusses and compares the results from a survey conducted among entry-level television journalists in a municipal-level television station in northeast China.

### **Eyes on the West—Producer of *Oriental Nightly News***

*Oriental Nightly News* is a popular nightly news show aired on Shanghai Oriental Satellite Television (SOST). Different from other news shows aired on provincial level television channels, *Oriental Nightly News* has a broader focus, not only covering local news in Shanghai, but also national and international news. Occasionally it is even able to connect with reporters overseas for real-time live reports.

Being the only satellite channel in Shanghai, a highly developed city in China, SOST has more resources in terms of funding and journalists than many other provincial-level channels. The producer of the show is Li, an ambitious news professional in his mid-30s. Working at SOST since graduating from college, Li now also holds the position of deputy director of the news center at SOST. Li told me that SOST is the only channel that has the resources at the same level as CCTV (China Central Television). Connecting with overseas reporters for live reports is something that no other provincial-level channel is able to do, so far, except CCTV.

Speaking of this, Li was obviously excited over the abundant resources that he was able to use for news production at SOST. I asked him whether *Oriental Nightly News* has achieved his standards for an ideal news show. He answered, “Probably only 70%.” “What was lacking then?” I followed up. He pointed to three factors: himself as a producer, the restraints at the television stations in terms of resources and space of reporting, and the quality of reporters.



These three factors showed increasing professionalization of journalists, as they are not primarily evaluated on political orientation and loyalty to the CCP, but more on their craft as a reporter. More importantly, despite the envious resources in terms of both hardware (funding, technology, etc.) and software (journalists, management institutions, etc.) at the television station, Li indicated that the limited space for reporting has put constraints on the quality of the news show he produces.

Despite this sobering understanding, news production process is highly individual, which may lead to creative interpretations of news stories. During the day when I visited SOST, Li invited me to join the daily staff meeting attended by 13 journalists, which took place at around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. This one-hour show airs daily at 11:30 p.m., so most news production activities take place in afternoons and evenings. The journalists and producers share a spacious and open office with dozens of cubicles installed. Three high-definition big-screen television sets were mounted on the wall faced by Li, the channels on which were CNN, NBC, and BBC. Also a close follower of foreign print media such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Li sees these news outlets as models to compare his own news show with and to learn from. Of course, Li admits that due to political constraints, he is not able to produce shows comparable to those in the United States. Nevertheless, Li displays a unique sense of optimism, which is rare among Chinese news professionals. Instead of lamenting on the distance between Chinese television news shows and their foreign counterparts due to the political and professional limitations he mentioned above, he sees the distance as an opportunity to create shows that are different, and possibly pioneering.

Li's team shares a similar mindset. The staff meeting has two sections: commenting on yesterday's show and deciding news stories to be included in today's show, including finding

appropriate perspectives to those news stories. The appropriate perspectives have to be well accepted by both the audience and government officials. During the staff meeting I attended, Li's comments on the show broadcast on the day before focused on the balance between reporting news stories and news commentary. He said that the show should have highlighted exclusive footage, in order to show off the abundant resources and reporting capability of SOST. On the other hand, the show should have played down the commentary that might attract unwelcome attention from government officials. This was not to say that the show should get rid of independent voices and completely conform to the official political discourse, but the balance should have been maintained well. This is essentially the process of identifying the red lines that cannot be crossed for specific issues.

The second section of the staff meeting is the discussion process that displays individuality in the interpretations of news, as mentioned above. Specifically, there are two observations through which we can discern such individuality. First, the discussion during the staff meeting contains frequent satire of political figures and events, and a deep dissatisfaction and passive anger over certain issues; second, the emphasis on how to make full use of exclusive video footage can be part of these political expressions, since using official video footage distributed by CCTV would certainly fully conform to the official political discourse. Moreover, Li told me that when commenting on political news that happened outside of Shanghai, they have more space for criticism. Such political expressions in actual news content are not full reflections of the individual interpretation of political news, but it is a creative and brave way to indirectly express a point of view under the political constraints. These two observations will be detailed in the description of the meeting below.

I visited Li in July 2013, during which time a bridge collapsed in a southwest Chinese province of Sichuan. It was a local scandal that drew national attention. At the time, print media had already reported on this incident and the commentary centered on the question of whether the tragic collapse was a natural disaster caused by heavy rains, or a manmade accident because of the poor construction quality. The consensus seems to point to the latter. Given the fact that television is more strictly controlled by the party-state than newspaper, Li and his team were discussing the perspective to the story, and whether they should also present the story using the frame of a natural disaster versus a manmade accident.

“Most reports in the newspaper presented this as a natural disaster versus a manmade accident.” A journalist said.

“Would it put us at risk if we continue to use the same frame?” Another journalist questioned.

“We can say it is a natural disaster first, and then report on how it is a manmade accident.” A third journalist joked.

Li did not participate in this particular conversation. Maybe he already had a decision in mind. I tuned in to *Oriental Nightly News* that day, and found that the title of this news story was “Jiangyou Bridge Collapsed—a natural disaster or a manmade accident?” During the segment, the anchormen cited several major newspapers and online news portals such as *Southern Metropolis Daily*, *Guangzhou Daily*, and Xinhua Online Commentary. These news outlets all used the same frame that juxtaposes natural disasters and manmade accidents. Li later explained to me in a follow-up phone interview that if other news outlets have already broadly used such a frame, it would be less problematic for them to use the same frame. Moreover, this incident

happened in Sichuan province, 2,000 kilometers west of Shanghai, which made it easier for a Shanghai news outlet to question, if not criticize directly, a local scandal.

This reflects the dynamics among leading news outlets in China. Taking the lead on critical reporting is a risk, but only if other news outlets do not follow. In this case, for example, the increased number of news outlets using the same frame actually reduces the risk of being criticized or even punished by the party-state. For SOST, following the lead of critical reporting by liberal newspapers both reduced the risk for those newspapers and created space for criticism. This is how journalists find cracks in the censorship system.

The creative use of video footage is another way of political expression. During the first section of the staff meeting, Li commented on the previous day's broadcast. One of the news stories was an earthquake that happened in Ya'an, Sichuan province. The report on the earthquake could be tricky because the Ya'an government did not reveal certain information such as the death toll and the situation of collapsed buildings, out of fear of criticism of its capability to govern and to restore order. Li commented that whenever there was a discrepancy in factual information such as the death toll between the information journalists collected and that released by the local government, it was best to use the government's official information. This is because using non-official information may incur criticism from higher-level authorities at the television station or the propaganda department of the Shanghai Communist Party Committee. This does not mean, however, that journalists have run out of means to get around potential repercussions for truthful reporting. Li further commented on this news report that the situations of the victims of the earthquake had not received much media coverage at all, and that was a gap they needed to fill. Moreover, SOST had its own journalists sent to the frontline, reporting first-hand situations of the aftermath of the earthquake. Broadcasting video footage of

earthquake victims not only exhibits the exclusive footage that only SOST has, but also fulfills the journalistic needs to report truthfully without getting into conflict with official government information and data.

Li and his team have their own interpretations of political news. Although the political environment constrains what they can report and comment on, their journalistic judgment does not change because of this, and they have developed creative ways to get around potential political obstacles to truthful reporting and to express their true interpretation of news as much as possible. This is an example of finding the cracks in the censorship system. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the journalistic spin Li and his team were able to execute was limited. The critical reports and commentary were mostly already seen on other news outlets. If we say *Oriental Nightly News* case only mildly shows journalistic aspirations as a fracture in the censorship system, the following case study demonstrates how journalistic aspirations can actually broaden the space for critical reporting, when certain political interests meet journalistic inquiries.

### **The Pioneer during a Time of Change—The Creator and Producer of *Just in Nanjing***

The turn of the twenty-first century marks a new era for Chinese television. Since media marketization picked up pace in the early 1990s, reduced state funding and increasing competition have led to fierce competition in the media market. For television, by 1999 each provincial television station had established a satellite channel (Zhao and Guo 2005), in addition to the local channels<sup>36</sup>. The increasing number of channels that ordinary Chinese audiences can receive at home, along with the ever-more-diverse television content, exerted pressure on television producers to increase ratings and produce profits.

---

<sup>36</sup> While satellite channels can be received by audiences across the country, local channels only broadcast among local audiences.

The situation is similar for television news programs. At Jiangsu television station, the launch of the satellite channel and the restructuring of the local channels meant personnel change. Jing was a mid-level producer at Jiangsu Television Station (JST). Holding a master's degree in Chinese language and literature from the prestigious Nanjing University, Jing had had experiences in cultural programs, sports programs, and news programs at JST. During the personnel change in the early 2000s, Jing became the director of the local channels at JST.

The promotion gave Jing the power and opportunity to do a news program different from others. He termed the situation as “breaking-out”<sup>37</sup> 突围 (Interview 16). Back in the late 1990s, television news programs mushroomed, but no one seems to be leading the trend, as no particular news program had high ratings or had great influence among the audience. With the ambition to create a leading news show, Jing and his team studied a number of Taiwanese television news shows. They found that Taiwanese television news had a visible difference from the news shows in Mainland China, that is, their shows tend to use colloquial language and focus on stories of ordinary people. Of course, an almost inevitable result was that sometimes the news turned out to be more like gossip, but there were in-depth reports on social and political issues. Jing realized that while on the surface Taiwanese news seemed “vulgar” and loud, the core was something missing in Mainland China. The late 1990s was a time when everybody knew that it was more important for television news to attract audience than to please political leaders, but few had figured out how. For Jing, the key to success in such a competitive media environment was to use plain language and to focus on ordinary people's daily lives. This was the core of television *Life News* 民生新闻. Indeed, for Chinese journalists, this was a major departure from previous news production that exclusively focused on politics and propaganda.

---

<sup>37</sup> Interview 16 with a Chinese journalism professor familiar with Jing and served as on the advisory board for the creation of *Just in Nanjing*.

With his insights and experiences, merely reporting on local life stories was not revolutionary enough for Jing. He further realized that critical reporting was another important aspect of the news brand he wanted to create. Of course, Jing was not the first person to realize the value of critical reporting in the Chinese political environment. In fact, a news show aired on China Central Television (CCTV) named *Focus* was already highly popular among the Chinese audience. By the late 1990s, *Focus* had a daily audience of 300 million (Chan 2002). The main reason for such popularity was its criticism of local officials and disclosure of local wrongdoings. However, the news program that Jing wanted to create was different from *Focus*. For Jing, *Focus* was still too distant from ordinary people, in terms of both the geographical origins of the issues and the formal language the anchors used. As a result, Jing decided to create a show that was distinct from other television news shows on two grounds: (1) its focus on ordinary people, and (2) engagement in critical reporting.

As emphasized earlier, the fractures detailed in each chapter do not work separately in actuality. I analyze each fracture individually for analytical purposes. In this case, political leader's interests also played into the success of the news show Jing was about to launch—*Just in Nanjing*. In Chapter 2, I have already discussed the case of *Just in Nanjing*, but only from the perspective of local leader's political interests. To piece together the journalistic and political aspects of the success of *Just in Nanjing*, it is important to note here again that while Jing was certainly the major force for the creation of *Just in Nanjing*, without the support and encouragement from then vice party secretary of Jiangsu province and the party secretary of Nanjing municipality Li Yuanchao (hereafter Li), this show may have had to concede at least on the second ground—engagement in critical reporting. Not long after its initial launch on January 1, 2002, Li personally visited the newsroom and encouraged the team and the anchorman to be

bold in criticizing local officials. Li even specified that cadres up to the bureau chief 局长 level<sup>38</sup> can be criticized. As discussed in Chapter 2, Li's decision to encourage news criticism is embedded in the cadre management and promotion system in China.

The personal encouragement from the highest-level official in the whole province enabled producers and journalists to criticize officials at lower levels. Criticism became the core of the media brand that this show created, recognizable to its loyal audience. Shortly after the initial launch, the ratings rose to 9.2% between January and April 2003 (Miao 2011, 103). In July 2004, the average rating of *Just in Nanjing* was 8.3%, with the highest rating of the month being 17.7% (Wang 2011). The skyrocketing ratings had created considerable profits for JTS. In 2004, the advertising revenue from *Just in Nanjing* was over USD 13.14 million, whereas the 2001 advertising revenue of the entire JTS City Channel was only USD 3.38 million (Xie and Zhou 2005, 9).

The space for critical reporting is never still. Based on how the fractures in the censorship system interact with political situations, the space for critical reporting that was developed before can shrink again. About half a year later, Li attended to the matter of this news show again. This time, instead of encouragement, Li made it clear that the criticism was enough, and it was time to scale back. As a result, the quantity and intensity of criticism of this show declined over time. So did its rating.

\*\*\*

When we compare the above two cases, we can find that the journalistic aspirations of these two mid-level producers are different. While both Li (the producer of *Oriental Nightly News*) and Jing have the ambition to create pioneering and possibly revolutionary television

---

<sup>38</sup> According to the Civil Servant Law, bureau chief level (厅局正职) is the fifth level cadre from top down. There are eleven levels of cadres in the Chinese civil servant system.



news shows, their approaches reflect distinct journalistic orientations. Li has always looked up to western style journalism, but Jing focused more on the Chinese television news environment and studied Taiwanese television news shows. Moreover, Jing had a supportive political environment where journalistic inquiries were met by political interests. However, precisely because of such unique coincidence, the space for critical reporting immediately shrank once such political interests disappeared.

Despite the differences, a commonality between Jing and Li is that both of them were mid-level producers. This was key to the success of both shows. With the power to decide news content while enjoying limited personal liability, Jing and Li were able to produce news according to their visions, within certain limits. This suggests the importance of the vertical dimension--journalist's position in a news organization. If we categorize both Li and Jing as American-style professionals, according to Hassid's (2011) typology, as they both pursue journalistic independence and are not involved in advocacy, the next case study centers on a senior editor at a newspaper famous for its liberal and often critical reporting, and she represents advocate professionals.

### **Fighting, But Not Alone—a senior editor at *The Beijing News***

I met Song in a coffee shop in downtown Beijing. We talked about stories behind her investigative reporting, other print news outlets, and her fellow journalists with similar ideals and boldness. Fortunately, among the many fights that she had fought as a journalist to publicize social injustice—the often “sensitive” issues deemed by the party-state—she did not fight alone. The journalistic work that she was most proud of involves the issue of “black jails” in China.

Black jails, as is often referred to in the press, are places where extra-judicial detention happens. The people thrown into the black jails are often petitioners and political dissidents. The

location of such black jails can be hotel rooms and mental hospitals paid for by local governments. The existence of black jails reflects the failure of the “letters and calls” 信访 system, the official channel for petitions. Black jails are used by local officials to detain petitioners, preventing them from visiting Beijing when their grievances are not heard locally, or stopping them from staging local protests. Thus, black jails are mostly instituted in Beijing, provincial capital cities, and other major cities, as petitioners often go up the ladder of administrative hierarchy if their petitions are not met locally<sup>39</sup>. The case Song investigated involved petitioners who were arrested and thrown into a mental hospital in an eastern city in Shandong province without either the petitioners’ or their families’ consent. In fact, their families were not even aware of the petitioners’ whereabouts. For the families, the petitioners essentially disappeared overnight.

At the end of 2008, the newspaper received a letter from a reader. This was not a conventional letter where a reader expresses gratitude for the quality of reporting or discusses issues reported by the newspaper. Instead, this letter intended to provide a tip for a report, albeit in an unconventional way. In this letter, sent from Xintai, Shandong Province, ominous red fingerprints marked the bottom of the page. Whether they were formed from red inkpad or blood could not be determined, but the symbolism was clear—an effort on the part of the writer to demonstrate the veracity of the information. The letter was about a severe breach of justice where a group of people were illegally detained simply because they petitioned local governments over certain issues. Especially during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the party bosses of local townships were required to prevent petitioners from going to Beijing (越级上访), and this became part of their cadre evaluation criteria (Huang 2008). Thus, township governments

---

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed report on the black jails in China, please read a report from *Caixin* magazine, “A day in the life of a Beijing ‘Black Guard’,” at <http://english.caixin.com/2013-04-02/100509391.html>

are under the pressure to manage petitioning cases. In order to prevent repeat petitioners from visiting Beijing again, local governments have come up with the method of accusing petitioners of suffering from mental illness and thus to require treatment in mental hospitals. As a result, petitioners were thrown into a mental hospital without any due process of law. Legally, *The Beijing News* also pointed out that the Mental Health Law that was under draft since 1985 still has not been passed. Therefore, there is not a specific law in China that protects the rights of mental patients. It was unclear how long these “mental patients” would be detained in the hospital.

According to Song’s reporting, a local mental hospital in Xintai cooperated with the local government and received 1,700 yuan from the government for every patient it admitted. These “mental patients” tried to communicate with each other and secretly wrote down diaries in order to preserve some kind of evidence of the horrifying experience that they endured. Song sees cases like this as a severe breach of human rights. She revealed that one day when she was working on the case till late night, she could not help but cry to herself because of the agonizing injustice and pain projected from the first-hand evidence she had access to. Song sent out a small team of journalists who, with their tremendous capability and courage, broke into the strictly monitored mental hospital and collected evidence and material. When the news story was ready to publish on a journalistic basis of accurate factual information, the burning question was, can the editor-in-chief, the staff, and the whole organization of *The Beijing News* take the risk of publishing such a politically sensitive report?

The news broke back in 2008, when the term “black jails” itself was already a sensitive word. Thus a detailed investigate report on a black jail was unimaginable. Nevertheless, Song decided to press the editor-in-chief at *The Beijing News* to publish the report. It is important to

note that the editor-in-chief is the person responsible for all reports published by the newspaper, and there were plenty of cases where editor-in-chiefs were punished in the form of demotion, dismissal, fine, or even jail time. However, as an elite newspaper with the reputation of publishing quality reports that sometimes point directly at social and political ills, the editor-in-chief decided to stand with Song and published the report. This, again, suggests the importance of a journalist's position in a news organization. Journalistic aspirations together with decision power can push for critical reporting.

Not surprisingly, the Shandong provincial government was furious. It complained to the Central Propaganda Department (CPD), and asked for punishment of the newspaper. The Shandong provincial government denied the existence of black jails. In the meantime, they bribed petitioners in order to make sure they rejected interviews by the news media. To add to the complexity of the issue, the General Administration of Publication and Press (GAPP) 新闻出版署 also started its own investigation on the dispute between the Shandong provincial government and *The Beijing News*. Fortunately, the seasoned journalists from the newspaper kept all kinds of evidence intact, such as recorded audio and materials from the mental hospital, in order to show the truthfulness of the report.

During the time of the investigation, this report was picked up by major online news portals such as Xinhuanet.com and people.com.cn. Several other news outlets have also broadcast or published commentary on this case. During a CCTV television show on legal issues *Today's Observation* (今日观察) broadcast on December 10, 2008, one day after *The Beijing News* report was published, a commentator said, "it is black humor that the local government wants the mental patient to sign a pledge not to petition again. If you think he has mental illness, why do you want him to sign the pledge?" The program further used the Petition Work

Regulations issued by the State Council in 2005 to show the legal basis of petitioners' rights. Other news outlets such as *China Youth Daily*<sup>40</sup>, *Hebei Youth Daily*<sup>41</sup>, and *Xiaoxiang Morning Newspaper*<sup>42</sup> also published opinion editorials denouncing the practice of accusing petitioners as mental patients in order to prevent them from petitioning. The fact that both official and commercialized news outlets sided with petitioners and *The Beijing News* instead of Shandong government not only shows the general consensus on the lack of justice and due process of law in the petitioning process, but also hints at the general position of the central government on this issue. Note that news outlets such as CCTV are the mouthpieces of the highest leadership in the Chinese party-state. Moreover, the fact that a number of other news outlets picked up the story reduced the risk for *The Beijing News*, a similar observation discussed earlier in the case of *Oriental Nightly News*.

Song told me that this case became involved with the struggle between Zhou Yongkang (the hardliners faction) and Wen Jiabao (the reformers faction); both were former members of the Politburo Standing Committee, the highest decision-making body in China. The whole investigation process conducted by GAPP took almost four months, with the conclusion that there was nothing untrue in the newspaper report, signifying a win by the reformers faction. However, this prolonged process of investigation reflected how serious the struggle between the two factions within the top leadership of the CCP was. This also showed how much pressure the editors and journalists at *The Beijing News* undertook in order for this story to be published.

---

<sup>40</sup> December 9, 2008, "Why are petitioners always called 'mental patients'?" *China Youth Daily*. [http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2008-12/09/content\\_2463216.htm](http://zqb.cyol.com/content/2008-12/09/content_2463216.htm)

<sup>41</sup> December 9, 2008, "Whose shame is it that petitioners are thrown into mental hospitals?" *Hebei Youth Daily*. <http://www.hbqnb.com/news/html/Hqmhsp/2008/129/08129827182413.html>

<sup>42</sup> This is a newspaper circulated in Changsha, Hunan Province. December 9, 2008, "How healthy could the power be if it accuses petitioners as mental patients?" <http://news.163.com/08/1209/09/4SN8QA3P00012Q9L.html>

This is a case where journalists and editors used their wisdom, resources, and above all, a determined sense of responsibility to uncover the truth. This also earned the newspaper the reputation of reporting the truth and standing on the side of the people and the weak. For the news organization as a whole, experiencing such a high-profile investigation involving high-level government and Party agencies only served to strengthen the identity of the organization and its firm grasp in the news market. Moreover, this piece of investigative reporting should probably have attracted the attention of journalism award judges, and I asked Song about this.

“We despise journalism awards from the government.” Song said, “If a journalist wins an award from the government, that would be a humiliation.” Song told me that liberal journalists who take news professionalism seriously have their own journalism award, evaluated by experienced and liberal journalists and scholars. *The Beijing News* has won a number of awards from this small group of news professionals. These news professionals tend to be American-style professionals and advocate professionals, using Hassid’s (2011) typology.

Despite the incredible courage and professionalism that Song and her team exhibited, an important note is that the party-state is the ultimate authority that decides the space for critical reporting. In this case, CPD, GAPP, and even the top national leaders in the Politburo Standing Committee were all involved in the investigation and evaluation of the news report. As Song pointed out, a very important reason that *The Beijing News* could win was that this case was caught between the struggle within the top leadership, and it happened to be on the side of the faction that ultimately won.

\*\*\*

In the case of *The Beijing News*, although the black jail report was published and eventually acknowledged by the party-state, we should not overlook the fact that print media are

under strict control by the party-state. With appropriate political timing and issue areas, journalists can function as a fracture in the censorship system, such as in the black jails report case, but fractures are not fault lines. Indeed, Song told me that there are pre- and post-publication mechanisms to ensure limited criticism and reporting space for Beijing newspapers. The first mechanism is pre-publication self-censorship. This is a practice established by both formal and informal rules. While formal rules are generally vague, such as not to publish information with the intention to subvert the government, informal rules are learned and socialized by journalists over time. For example, prominent cases where editors are demoted or even a whole news organization was shut down can function as warnings signifying severe consequences for non-conformers. The editor of *Freezing Point*, a column of *China Youth Daily*, was fired in 2006 after publication of an opinion-editorial questioning Chinese modern history as accounted by the CCP. *Twenty-first Century Global News* (21 世纪环球报道) was a newspaper first published in Guangzhou in May 2002, but was closed down in March 2003, a main reason for which was its frequent reports on sensitive political issues such as non-governmental organizations being monitored by the government, sharp polarization in economic status as a result of the economic reform, and Taiwanese politics.

Besides pre-publication measures, there are also post-publication mechanisms of censorship, all of which are executed by the Central Propaganda Department. After news reports and commentary are published, if the Central Propaganda Department deems the news reports as crossing the red lines, a common practice of media control is known as “post-incident responsibility track-down” 事后追查制 (Interview 9). It is done in two ways: (1) criticizing specific news reports; (2) regularized monthly comments on the news reports from all media outlets. The main purpose of the monthly comments is to criticize certain newspapers and their

reports and set them as bad examples. A potential consequence of this is that when this practice is repeated time and time again, what was blurry boundaries for critical reporting may become more and more clear, at least for certain issues. For example, after the Xinjiang Uyghur riots in 2008 that drew broad international attention, rules on how to report on “sudden incidents” involving ethnic minorities became clear—either not to report at all (“taboo topics” 禁令), or to use the Xinhua report (新华社通稿) with no change in wording in order to streamline the discourse (统一口径).

Beyond this specific case, there are three general types of regulations: “Do not report” (不许报道), “Use Xinhua report” (新华社稿), and “Do not follow up” (不许炒作). If the regulation is “Do not follow up,” then there is space for critical reporting. Song told me that this means reports that were already finished would not be killed. Moreover, seasoned news professionals have learned how to negotiate with media control agencies. If criticized in the monthly comments report by the Central Propaganda Department (CPD), for example, the editor-in-chief of the news organization criticized has to write up a report explaining itself. Editors have learned to turn this report into a venue for self-defense. They may remind the CPD of how the news organization has been compliant by pointing to the positive reports that the news organization has published, or how it did not follow up reports that were not allowed to follow up. They may also use the argument that the sensitive reports criticized by the CPD have already been reported by other media outlets, as a way to shirk responsibility.

### **The Elitist Minority**

While Song and journalists like her are proud of the possibility that journalism can push for positive change in policy, another group of journalists cautions the trend of too much advocacy. Lu is an experienced news professional and media observer. He summarized the steps



of how news reports can lead to policy change as: (a) reports on negative issues instigate (b) strong resonance among the audience, that leads to (c) pressure from public opinion, and finally (d) leaders make decisions to change policy. The downside of this, however, is that this actually constitutes “media court” (媒体审判). But the media are not supposed to be the judges. It should have been the legal system that upholds justice. This may not only undermine the main function of the media, that is, to report news, but also negatively affect the justice system.

During my fieldwork, I found that many journalists’ name cards have hotline numbers for breaking news (报料热线). However, the phrase “breaking news” in Chinese (报料) has the connotation of disclosing something negative and scandalous involving political and business powers. Lu was critical of this. He described this as “legitimizing rumors.” He gave me the example of *Southern Metropolis Daily* (hereafter SMD), a famous outspoken newspaper published in the southern city of Guangzhou. Since the early 2000s as the Internet became widely adopted, SMD started to make use of the online media and integrated its print and online sections. Part of its news production process thus became: (a) online sources of news (报料), then (b) SMD chooses stories, followed by (c) SMD verifies the truthfulness of the stories, and finally (d) SMD publishes them as real news. Lu referred to this process as “legitimizing rumors.” Although some of these reports have led to changes in individual officials’ political fates when corruption cases were exposed, overall there is little impact on institutional change. However, those cases that did lead to change have granted journalists a “false aurora,” according to Lu.

Certainly Lu is an American-style professional who holds an attitude that prioritizes independence and objectivity. While the difference between Lu and Song is a matter of journalistic ideals and standards, it provides us with a view on how political Chinese journalists sometimes have to be. For advocate professionals, their sense of responsibility stems from the

society they are embedded in. They see themselves as social actors who should contribute to positive social change and eliminating injustice, with the help from the modest power of the media. Some of them do not intend to challenge the existing political system but merely to make the existing laws and regulations more effective; while others desire bolder political reforms. These journalists are agents of potential change, although *the political orientation of the news organizations they work for, local political environment, and their personal aspirations* decide how effective and what kind of political change they can push for. American-style professionals, on the other hand, look up to Western style journalism that prioritizes objectivity and timeliness. The problem is, however, that in an authoritarian political environment, the pursuit of news professionalism is unfortunately and inevitably compromised.

### **The Remaining Majority**

According to the Hassid (2011) typology, the majority of Chinese journalists are workaday journalists. They are ranked low on both independence and advocacy. However, this may not be entirely accurate, based on a small-scale survey done with television journalists at Changchun television station news center, a municipal level television station in the capital city of Jilin province in northeast China.

The survey was conducted on July 15 and 16, 2013, with journalists, editors, and cameramen working at three television life news shows at Changchun television station. There are a total of 96 effective responses. The respondents do not include people at management positions, such as producers or directors. So the respondents are entry-level television news professionals. They are typically responsible for conducting interviews, shooting video footage, writing scripts, and post-production editing. The respondents of the survey account for about two thirds of all the staff in the news center of Changchun television station. Changchun is the capital

city of Jilin province, thus Changchun television station faces a unique situation where both Jilin television station, which is located in the capital city Changchun, and Changchun television station compete not only for the same audience, but also similar news sources.

Although the survey statistics are in no way representative of all journalists in Changchun, let alone China, they nonetheless tell us much about the journalists working at the three popular television life news shows in Changchun. Therefore, instead of understanding these quantitative statistics as a basis for statistical inference, they should be seen as merely summarizing data that are qualitative in nature, i.e., journalistic orientations. Moreover, using surveys to study Chinese journalists is not a common approach in the study of Chinese politics and the media, due to various practical constraints such as lack of access to journalists or the sensitive nature of the research topic. Lin (2010) and Pan and Chan (2003) are the recent studies that survey Chinese journalists. Pan and Chan (2003) survey journalists in Shanghai working for all types of media outlets, and Lin (2010) surveys journalists in Guangzhou working for newspapers. However, both studies rely on a paradigm to understand Chinese journalists that only differentiates between party-journalism and professional journalism. This essentially only reflects the independence dimension in Hassid's typology. Given this gap in the literature, my survey with television journalists from Changchun television station, although not representative, is able to probe multiple dimensions of journalistic orientations that go beyond the independence dimension. Next, this chapter analyzes the results from the survey.

In Question 10, I asked them which of the following statements is the closest to their understanding of journalists. The distribution of their answers is below:

**Table 4.1. Q10-Which of the following description is closest to your understanding of journalists?**

| <b>Description</b>   | <b>Percentage</b> | <b>Frequency</b> |
|--|-------------------|------------------|
| 1. Journalists should help government better publicize policies, | 3.1%              | 3                |

|  |       |    |
|--|-------|----|
| laws, and regulations, in order to create a better public opinion environment.   |       |    |
| 2. Journalists are bridges between government and people. They should help effective communication between the two, in order to maintain social stability. | 28.1% | 27 |
| 3. Journalists should represent ordinary people, especially vulnerable social groups.  | 5.2%  | 5  |
| 4. Journalists should use their own influence in public opinion to help ordinary people solve problems.  | 19.8% | 19 |
| 5. Journalists should provide reports with news values, in order to help people understand issues and acquire information.                                 | 32.3% | 31 |
| 6. None of the above can represent my understanding.   | 3.1%  | 3  |
| 7. Refuse to answer  | 2.1%  | 2  |
| Total  | 93.7% | 90 |

Data Source: Author's 2013 survey of journalists working at Changchun television station. N=96

There are 5 respondents who picked more than one option. One respondent picked options 3 and 4; two respondents picked options 2 and 4; two respondents picked options 4 and 5; and one respondent picked options 2, 4, and 5. For those who said none of these options can represent their understandings, they wrote out their understandings:

“Journalists should be ‘accurate,’ that is, do not stand on anyone’s side.”

“Record the facts, investigate the truth.”

“For Chinese journalists, the answer is option 2; for foreign journalists, the answer is 5.”

In general, most journalists chose options 5, 2, and 4. As Hassid (2011) points out, communist professionals are the minority, as there were only 3 journalists who chose option 1. However, the number of journalists who chose option 5 was unusually high, opposite to Hassid’s understanding of Chinese journalists. Option 5 describes a journalistic orientation that is similar to western style journalists, emphasizing news values and information, and the largest group of journalists chose this option. More interestingly, opposite to Hassid’s understanding on one of the two scales he proposed—advocacy, a substantial number of journalists are ranked high on

advocacy. Those who chose options 3 and 4 accounted for 25% of the respondents. They see helping people solve problems as one of their main tasks, no matter out of concerns for ratings or their own journalistic values.

To further explore their views, the distribution of answers to Question 11 is below. In Question 11, I asked which of the following criterion is the most important when judging the quality of a television life news show.

**Table 4.2. Q11-Which criterion below do you think is the most important aspect when judging the quality of television life news shows?**

| Criterion                  | Percentage | Frequency |
|----------------------------|------------|-----------|
| 1. Objectivity             | 35.5%      | 34        |
| 2. Opinion                 | 37.5%      | 36        |
| 3. Information             | 26%        | 25        |
| 4. Others (please specify) | 1%         | 1         |
| 5. Refuse to answer        | 0%         | 0         |
| Total                      | 100%       | 96        |

Data Source: Author's 2013 survey of journalists working at Changchun television station. N=96  
 Note: The respondent who chose "other" specified that a combination of options 1, 2, and 3 is preferred.

As Table 4.2 shows, more journalists chose opinion than objectivity, which can be understood as being consistent with their answers to Question 10, where they emphasized their understanding that news should serve ordinary people. Of course, the second largest group emphasizes objectivity as a criterion for quality news.

Based on the answers to above two questions, a general understanding of this group of journalists is that, like advocate professionals, they are concerned about social injustice, and their reporting tends to focus on news stories of that nature. If so, their answers to Question 6 reveal an interesting pattern. In Question 6, I asked them when government agencies are mentioned in

their news show, what kind of news stories they are, and whether the tone towards government agencies is positive or negative.

**Table 4.3. Q6- when government agencies are mentioned in your news show, what kind of news stories are they?**

| <b>Description</b>   | <b>Percentage</b> | <b>Frequency</b> |
|--|-------------------|------------------|
| 1. The stories that disclose incompetency of gov't agencies.                                 | 11.5%             | 11               |
| 2. The stories that publicize relevant public policy information, to better inform citizens. | 58.3%             | 56               |
| 3. The stories that exhibit competency of gov't agencies.                                    | 10.4%             | 10               |
| 4. Others (please specify)   | 7.3%              | 7                |
| 5. Refuse to answer  | 8.3%              | 8                |
| Total  | 95.8%             | 92               |

Data Source: Author's 2013 survey of journalists working at Changchun television station. N=96

Most social injustice involves government agencies, such as property rights disputes and insufficient compensation during demolition and relocation. Even for disputes between consumers and private businesses, such as fake products and deceptive promotions, trade and industry bureaus should be in charge of resolving such disputes and regulating private businesses. However, when it comes to actual reporting, this group of journalists responded that most stories mentioning government agencies are not the ones exposing government incompetency. In fact, the number of journalists with the response of positive reporting exhibiting government competency and those with the response of critical reporting exposing government incompetency are almost the same, 10.4% and 11.5%, respectively. What this suggests is that, while this group of journalists sees advocacy as an important mission of journalists, they are not able to realize that mission in their actual work due to political constraints. The answers to Question 7 confirm the political constraints.

**Table 4.4. Q7-During the time you work at the television station, are there incidences where news stories could not be broadcast because they involve government agencies?**

| <b>Description</b>  | <b>Percentage</b> | <b>Frequency</b> |
|---------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 1. Never            | 3.1%              | 3                |
| 2. Once or twice    | 19.8%             | 19               |
| 3. Several times    | 28.1%             | 27               |
| 4. Often times      | 31.3%             | 30               |
| 5. Other            | 1%                | 1                |
| 6. Refuse to answer | 16.7%             | 16               |
| Total               | 100%              | 96               |

Data Source: Author's 2013 survey of journalists working at Changchun television station. N=96

Table 4.4 shows that 31.3% of respondents said it happened often that news stories could not be broadcast due to political constraints. Therefore, while Tables 4.1 and 4.2 suggest a journalist orientation on advocacy and help the weak, Table 4.3 and 4.4 reveal that these entry-level journalists are not able to report on the news stories they are most concerned about, due to the political constraints. All this suggests that mid-level news professionals have more potential to push for critical reporting than entry-level journalists.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the case studies and the survey analysis in this chapter, we can draw three conclusions. First, Chinese journalists are a diverse group of professionals. For American-style and advocate professionals, while they may both push for more space for critical reporting, the rationales behind their behaviors can be different. American-style professionals focus more on producing pioneering shows that are popular with audiences, while advocate professionals care more about stories involving social injustice.

Second, mid-level news professionals have more potential to push for critical reporting, if they aspire to do so, than entry-level journalists. Above all, mid-level editors and producers have to approve the content of news before publication or broadcast. So if they were not willing to pursue certain news stories, entry-level journalists would not be able to continue working on

those stories. Moreover, mid-level news professionals have more power when negotiating with higher-level supervisors such as editor-in-chiefs and senior producers.

Finally, journalistic aspirations can only be realized with appropriate political timing and issue areas. Only when the news stories conform, in one way or another, to the political interests of certain leaders can they be published or broadcasted. Once news is produced, how will it affect public opinion, if at all? Chapter 5 examines media effects on public opinion in authoritarian China.



## **Chapter 5 Limited Effects of Critical News on Public Opinion**

Fractured censorship system allows sporadic criticism in news on local governments and officials. Such criticism serves the divergent interests of the central and local governments, the commercial interests of news organizations, and journalistic aspirations. Having examined the news production process, the next question concerns news consumption. Specifically, once such news is produced and broadcast or published, how will it affect public opinion on relevant issues, if at all? This chapter tests the effects of critical news on public opinion in China.

Receiving news, no matter from television, newspaper, or the Internet, has become an indispensable part of the lives of active citizens. The effects of news, which certainly vary across individuals and contexts, have been extensively studied, especially in democratic societies. Indeed, the news media has long been viewed as an important pillar in established democracies. Dubbed as the Fourth Estate, the news media disseminate political information to voters, monitor government behavior through news reports and in-depth investigation, and provide a venue for politicians to communicate with voters (Janowitz 1975; Schudson 1998; Sparrow 1999).

In addition to the theoretical accounts of the political role of news media in democracies, McCombs and Shaw's (1972) pioneer study is among the first to empirically examine the effects of news. The major finding, conceptualized as agenda-setting and confirmed by later studies, is that the focus of attention by the news media on public issues can be transferred to the public's focus of attention (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; MacKuen 1981; McCombs 1981). Building on this, later studies of news effects find that by emphasizing certain issues over others, the news media can influence voters' evaluations of political actors (Krosnick and Kinder 1990). This is the priming effect. More fundamentally, political and policy issues can be framed in multiple ways,

and which frame the news media choose to present issues can influence both voters' and political elites' considerations (Callaghan and Schnell 2000; Nelson et al. 1997; Terkildsen and Schnell 1997).

Being a major way of communication between politicians and voters, the news media in democracies are generally more independent from political powers than those in authoritarian regimes. Indeed, the news media are tightly controlled in most authoritarian societies. This poses an interesting and challenging question for scholars of politics and the media: with less diversity in news content due to authoritarian media control, how do the theories of media effects apply, if at all, to authoritarian contexts?

This chapter first briefly reviews the major theories of media effects, mostly derived from democratic experiences. Based on this, this chapter then introduces the challenge and the need to examine media effects in nondemocratic contexts, such as China. After introducing the political issue examined in the two field experiments, this chapter analyzes and interprets the experimental results, with the aim to shed light on the theoretical development of media effects across different political regimes.

### **Theories of Media Effects in Democracies**

Despite skepticism over such categorization (Neuman and Guggenheim 2011), in general there are three models of media effects: direct effects model, minimal effects model, and powerful and cumulative effects model. Direct effects model gained popularity at the beginning of communication research. A representative work is Harold Lasswell's (Lasswell 1930, 1935, 1938) study on propaganda and the effective manipulation of public minds, especially when passive and atomized audiences lack independent sources of information. In 1960, Klapper (Klapper 1960) coined the term "minimal effects," signifying a new phase of communication

research. Klapper (1960) finds that audience's prior beliefs, personal experiences, and discussion with opinion leaders and friends may affect how much the media take effects on personal opinions and attitudes. This is referred to as a two-step flow (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948), which means messages from the media are mediated by opinion leaders during the process of media messages taking effects. Finally, starting from the 1970s, a group of scholars have demonstrated that the media have "not so minimal effects" through empirical research (Iyengar et al. 1982). As briefly mentioned earlier in this paper, the media can tell the audience what to think about, i.e., the agenda-setting effects (McCombs and Shaw 1972), as well as how to think about it, i.e., the priming and framing effects (Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

One of the central debates among different media effects theories is that when we consider the news media as part of the democratic process, there are many other variables that may influence the direct versus minimal effects dichotomy (Neuman and Guggenheim 2011). For example, scholars find that individuals who are well informed and strongly opinionated have deeply rooted attitudes and thus are less likely to change their opinions responding new information (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 60). However, all theories of media effects, despite important differences among them, are based on an important assumption—diversity in information sources and news content. In authoritarian regimes where all media outlets are strictly controlled by the state, sources of information and news content may not be as diversified, and such media control may be a known fact to the public. Under such circumstances, how do the theories of media effects apply, if at all?

The research on media effects on public opinion in China is scarce and outdated. Chen and Shi (2001) is among the first to quantitatively examine media effects in China. They find that more exposure to the state-controlled media leads to more negative attitudes toward the CCP

regime. This was an interesting finding in that many scholars assumed that an important mechanism for authoritarian regimes to maintain legitimacy is through propaganda and control of information. Yet this finding challenges the very effects of propaganda. Despite the value of the study, their data come from a nationwide survey conducted in 1993 and 1994, during which time the major role of Chinese news media was mouthpiece. News content was thus mostly propaganda. In other words, there was little criticism in news in the early 1990s. Moreover, the measurement on exposure to the media was indirect. In the survey, respondents were asked about the frequency they watch television or read newspaper last week. Watching television, however, can include watching entertainment shows that may have nothing to do with news or propaganda. Therefore, the measure of media exposure was limited and outdated.

It is more difficult to find recent studies on media effects in China. A study on framing may indirectly suggest media effects in China. Zhou and Moy (2007) study the interaction between online public opinion and traditional media discourse. They find that the frequent input and output roles are mutual. Online public opinion may lead traditional media to focus attention on particular social events, but traditional media may shape online discussion later on. This implies that online public opinion, a small fraction of public opinion representing only those who use the Internet to participate in online discussion, may be influenced by traditional media coverage. However, we cannot infer from the finding whether criticism in news coverage affects public opinion, and if so, in what direction.

In fact, implicitly or explicitly, it is a well-accepted assumption among scholars that the state-controlled news media are effective at influencing public opinion, not only in China, but also in many other non-democratic regimes, as controlling information is an important means to establish and maintain regime legitimacy and political stability, specifically through reshaping

the hearts and minds of nonelites (Linz 1975; Neuman 1991). This assumption is similar to the one that was discussed and challenged in Chen and Shi (2001). Taking this assumption, earlier research on propaganda during the Maoist period has examined the institutions, techniques, and effects of propaganda campaigns (Yu 1964; Liu 1971). In the 1990s, scholarly attention on propaganda seems to have given way to censorship. During this time, scholarly research on politics and the media in China started to pay attention to the discernable role of journalists and the commercial interests of news organizations, as a result of the media reform that picked up pace in the 1990s in the forms of deregulation, commercialization, and partial privatization (Stockmann 2013). This line of research captures the sometimes palpable yet often times precarious role of journalists (Lee 1990; Zhao 1998, 2000; Zhou 2000; Tong 2007, 2011; Shirk 2011), as well as the changes in the management structure in news organizations and the news production process (He 1997, 2000; Lee 2000; Shirk 2011; Stockmann 2013). For the studies that focus on either journalists or news organizations, a common underlying basis is the censorship paradigm, which presumes the effects of news. Indeed, without the assumption that news affects public opinion, censorship would be baseless and its existence would be difficult to justify.

Empirically, a similar rationale applies for the Chinese party-state that continues to exercise the ever-more-sophisticated system of media control over both traditional (newspaper, radio, television, film) and the new media (online news portals and social media). For the Chinese party-state, so far the fear for criticism in news content and the need to control news production seem to be based upon both the need to maintain the dominating status of official ideologies and the alarming precedents such as the fall of the former Soviet Union, a common blame for which is the removal of control over the news media. Although the party-state has

been increasingly using objective research to monitor and steer public opinion, especially online public opinion<sup>43</sup>, the assumption remains that news affects public opinion. This is an assumption worth investigating. Does news actually affect public opinion to the same extent that it does in democracies, especially considering that the state control over the news media is not a secret among the public, and that the party-state exercises strict control over other areas of political and civil liberties? In other words, does news matter? More specifically, does criticism in news, as examined in the first part of this study, matter for the public?

Using the contentious issue of demolition and relocation in contemporary Chinese society, I conducted two field experiments on news effects and find that critical reports of this issue have only limited effects on how the participants perceive demolition and relocation. In contrast to exposure to critical news, personal experience with demolition and relocation and discussing politics with family and friends are important factors affecting participants' opinions on this issue. This not only suggests that media effects theories derived from democratic contexts do not always apply in authoritarian regimes, but also implies that allowing limited criticism in news may actually help consolidate the authoritarian rule in China. Next, this chapter introduces the issue of demolition and relocation, followed by a description of the experimental design. Finally, this chapter discusses the experimental results and the implications for authoritarian duration in China.

### **The Issue of Demolition and Relocation in China**

Among the many contentious political and social issues facing China, demolition and relocation<sup>44</sup> became widespread and serious especially since the late 1990s (Xu et al. 2009). This

---

<sup>43</sup> Such examples include the annual public opinion report project led by Yu Guoming, a professor at Renmin University, and the establishment of the online public opinion monitoring office under the people's website (people.com.cn) managed by the CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily*.

<sup>44</sup> Chaqian 拆迁, literally means demolition and relocation.

issue is related to two important aspects of the Chinese political system and public policies—the incentive structure for the local governments and the land development policies.

In China, land is state owned in urban areas and collectively owned in rural areas. This creates ambiguity problem for property rights (Zhu 2002). Specifically, “China’s practice is to separate land use rights from ownership; only the former are permitted to be privatized. This means that the land market is a leasehold system for land use rights.” (Xu et al. 2009, 893) This kind of demarcation of land rights, combined with the financial incentives of the local governments and the urbanization policy, led to the widespread practice of local governments selling land to developers in exchange for revenue. In fact, income from leasing land constitutes a substantial source of revenue for local governments. For example, Ho and Lin (2003) find that land sales comprises 30-70% of municipal revenue in many cities. While in theory this may breed market competition and stable local government revenue, the reality is that the institutional structure of land development contributes to the increasing rent-seeking activities, misallocation of land resources, land abuse, and corruption (Hsing 2006; Lin and Ho 2005; Xu 2001; Yeh and Wu 1996; Zhu 2002). This is because “land is still transferred non-transparently in most Chinese cities (through negotiation),” even though the central government has repeatedly required all commercial land to be transferred publicly, either through auction or public bidding (Xu et al. 2009, 894).

At the other end of the business of selling land is to accommodate residents living off the land. Facing alluring financial incentives, a natural logic of the local governments is to lower the price of compensation for indigenous residents, while raising the price of land sold to developers. Considering the fact that the real estate sector has become the pillar industry of the national economy (Xu et al. 2009, 895), let alone the contribution to local economy, it would be easier for

local governments to press more on the end of indigenous residents than the end of real estate developers. As a result, land acquisition, forced demolition, and insufficient compensation have been wide spread phenomena and problems. For example, according to statistics from the Beijing Supreme People's Court, all municipal courts dealt with only a few hundred property-related cases each year before 1992, when the property market took off. The figure increased to 8,103 in 1999, more than 10,000 in 2000, and more than 15,000 in 2001 (Miao 2003). By August 2003, the State Bureau for Letters and Calls, the top institution for appeals and grievances, received 11,641 petitions of dispute over relocation, a year-on-year growth of 50%, and 5,360 complainants, up 47% (Miao 2003). According to a report by the Chinese Construction Ministry, among all 4,820 letters of complaints it received between January and August in 2002, 28% were related to demolition and relocation; among the 1,730 formal appeals, 70% were related to demolition and relocation; among the 123 collective appeals, 83.7% were about demolition and relocation (Zhao 2003). In 2013, the State Bureau for Letters and Calls admits that demolition in urban towns and cities and land acquisition in rural areas are among the top problems reflected in appeals and grievances, based on the statistics from January to October 2013 (Xinhua 2013).

While disputes related to demolition and relocation are multi-folded, insufficient compensation is among the most common ones. It was not until June 2001 that the State Council, the top executive body in China, passed the Regulation Rules Regarding the Demolition and Relocation of Urban Structures, providing certain guidelines on the negotiation procedures, compensation, and relocation arrangements. However, research shows that this set of rules favors the interests of developers, besides the problem of inconsistencies between law and practice (Zhang 2004). Usually compensation for residents comes in two forms: cash or resettlement housing (Zhang 2004, 256). However, the specific terms are open to negotiation between



developers and residents. “According to the 2001 state ruling, provincial and city governments should provide specific criteria to determine the appropriate cash compensation according to the following factors: location, type of usage, and size of the structure to be demolished.” (Zhang 2004, 256) The calculation for resettlement housing depends on the cash value of the old property and that of the new one, with the differences compensated by cash. Disputes arise from the fact that the value of homes are often times difficult to calculate, especially when considering the factors such as moving away from hometowns and settling into a new environment. All these factors may be further complicated by employment, schools, hospitals, and so on<sup>45</sup>. Scholarly research and news reports alike have shown pervasive dissatisfaction among residents on the issue of demolition and relocation (Zhang 2004).

### **Experimental Design and Analysis**

In order to test the news effects on public opinion, I designed two field experiments, one conducted in Yangzhou (eastern China) with adults, the other conducted in Xi’an (central China) with university students, both on the issue of demolition and relocation. For both experiments, I use the posttest-only experimental design (Campbell and Stanley 1963).

Experiments have been used to study media effects for more than two decades (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). For Yangzhou experiment with adults, I use a simple experimental design with one treatment group and one control group. The treatment was watching a television news report on undercompensated demolition. For Xi’an experiment with university students, I use the experimental design with more than two independent random groups (Levin 1999). While the treatment is exposure to negative news reports on the issue of demolition, the levels of this independent variable include television, newspaper, and the Internet. Therefore, Xi’an

---

<sup>45</sup> A New York Times report titled “New China Cities: Shoddy Homes, Broken Hope” documents life changes, mostly negative, of resettled residents. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/world/asia/new-china-cities-shoddy-homes-broken-hope.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/world/asia/new-china-cities-shoddy-homes-broken-hope.html?_r=0)

experiment consists of four randomized groups: one control group and three treatment groups. Considering possible demand characteristics, or “pretest sensitization” (Aronson et al. 1990; Druckman et al. 2011), I use “posttest-only control group design” (Campbell and Stanley 1963, 25). In this design, participants are randomly assigned to either control or treatment group. Dependent variables are measured only once, i.e., without pretest measurements. To study experimental effects, researchers can compare potential differences of dependent variables among control and treatment groups. In this study, the major reason to choose this design is that exposure to negative news reports on sensitive issues such as demolition may lead participants to form the impression that the experiment has the intention to make them believe in the negative aspects of the controversial issue, as my pilot pretest conducted in Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province shows. During the pretest, I randomly approached a woman in a public park in Yangzhou. After acquiring her consent, I asked her opinions on demolition. I then showed her a 2-minute video of negative news report on demolition, after which I asked her opinions on demolition again. She said, “Well, based on what you just showed me, obviously demolition is an important issue and I am not satisfied with the way the government is handling the issue.” This makes it difficult to differentiate whether the participant truly changed her opinion or just catered to her assumed intention of my research. This problem is what Aronson et al. (1990, 140) referred to as pretest sensitization, where “the *interaction* [italic original] between the pretest and the threat [treatment] might be responsible for the subject’s devaluation of the magazine [the dependent variable].”

The most important basis of such an experiment design is randomization. Because participants are randomly assigned to either control or treatment groups, we can reasonably assume that the characteristics of all participants in different groups are identical or at least

similar, apart from random sampling variability (Druckman et al. 2011). This functions as an important foundation for us to compare whatever differences there might be in the posttest, from which we can conclude the results of the experiment (Aronson et al. 1990, 141). In other words, “by comparing the average outcome in the treatment group to the average outcome in the control group, the experimental researcher estimates the average treatment effect.” (Druckman et al. 2011, 17)

While avoiding pretest sensitization, posttest-only control group design has its own disadvantages. First, there is no way to collect information on participants’ initial beliefs on the issue of demolition. It is possible that the media effects are the strongest when participants hold initially benign opinions on demolition. In other words, the capability of such an experiment to test different hypotheses is limited. Because no prior information is collected, it was impossible to conduct, for example, blocked design that may incorporate other variables. Second, although posttest-only control group design avoids an interaction between pretest and treatment effects, it does not indicate whether such an interaction is possible at all (Aronson et al. 1990, 142).

Given the disadvantages, for this experiment, the central question is whether exposure to negative news media reports affects people’s perceptions on key social issues. Therefore, the posttest-only control group design is sufficient to answer this causal question, as experiments are able to address (Druckman et al. 2011).

#### *Yangzhou Experiment with Adults*

Given the constraints of time, funding, and access to participants, I was not able to conduct an experiment spanning a period of time, or the within-subjects design (Druckman et al. 2011, 18). I was only able to design and conduct an experiment where the whole process takes place based on the expectation that I would only be able to contact participants once. In order to

avoid the problem of pretest sensitization, I used the posttest-only control group design, a type of between-subjects design<sup>46</sup> (Druckman et al. 2011, 18) in the Yangzhou experiment:

Treatment Group:      Television news treatment      → Posttest

Control Group:          No treatment                              → Posttest

Participants were adults that I randomly approached in three public squares in Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province in eastern China. Yangzhou is a municipality with a population of 4.6 million<sup>47</sup>. From July 18 to 25, 2013, I randomly approached 132 people in total, of which 120 consented to answer the survey questionnaire. Among the 120 participants, 60 were randomly assigned to the treatment group, and 60 were randomly assigned to the control group. For the treatment group, I asked participants to watch a 2-minute video. This video is an excerpt from a news report from China Central Television (CCTV) on the issue of demolition and relocation. Specifically, the news report was about a demolition dispute between a farmer and the local township government due to insufficient compensation. Three specific facts are presented in this 2-minute video. First, the farmer did not receive nearly enough money to cover his financial loss due to demolition and relocation; second, if the farmer were relocated to a new house, he would lose his original source of income; finally, the dispute was not resolved in the end. I watched the video together with each participant assigned to the treatment group, after which I asked three questions regarding opinions on demolition and relocation. Specifically, I used Likert-scale with five levels for all three questions. They are as follows:

---

<sup>46</sup> According to Druckman et al. (2011, 18), a between-subjects design is where the researcher randomly assigns participants to distinct treatment groups. A within-subjects design is where a given participant is observed before and after receiving a treatment and there is no random assignment between subjects.

<sup>47</sup> This number comes from the sixth national population census in 2010.

1. Are existing disputes of demolition and relocation an important social issue? (Not at all important → very important)
2. Is it possible to solve the disputes of demolition and relocation? (Not at all possible → very possible)
3. Are you satisfied with the government's way of handling these disputes? (Very dissatisfied → very satisfied)

Since the dependent variables are ordinal with five categories, ANOVA is not an ideal test in this case because ANOVA assumes normally distributed residuals for interval dependent variable. Moreover, it only tests difference of means, not variance (Levin 1999, Ch. 4). Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance does not assume normally distributed residuals, and it is a non-parametric method for comparing two or more independent samples. Moreover, it can also be used to examine groups of unequal sizes (Kruskal and Wallis 1952; Spurrier 2003). The results suggest that exposure to negative television news reports affects participants' responses to Questions 1 and 3, as shown in Table 5.1 and 5.2.

**Table 5.1 Descriptive Statistics (Yangzhou Experiment)**

|   |                      | <b>Control</b> | <b>Treatment</b> |
|---|----------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Q1. Are existing disputes due to demolition and relocation an important social issue? | Not at all important | 0<br>(0)       | 0<br>(0)         |
|   | Not important        | 5<br>(3)       | 1.7<br>(1)       |
|   | Hard to say          | 16.7<br>(10)   | 15<br>(9)        |
|   | Important            | 48.3<br>(29)   | 33.3<br>(20)     |
|   | Very important       | 30<br>(18)     | 50<br>(30)       |
|   | Do not know          | 0<br>(0)       | 0<br>(0)         |
| Q2. Do you think it is possible to solve demolition and relocation disputes?          | Not at all possible  | 3.3<br>(2)     | 13.3<br>(8)      |
|   | Not possible         | 25<br>(15)     | 15<br>(9)        |
|   | Hard to say          | 33.3<br>(20)   | 28.3<br>(17)     |

|   |                   |              |              |
|---|-------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Q3. Are you satisfied with the government's way of handling these disputes? | Possible          | 35<br>(21)   | 38.3<br>(23) |
|   | Very possible     | 3.3<br>(2)   | 5<br>(3)     |
|   | Do not know       | 0<br>(0)     | 0<br>(0)     |
|   | Very dissatisfied | 18.3<br>(11) | 40<br>(24)   |
|   | Dissatisfied      | 30<br>(18)   | 31.7<br>(19) |
|   | Hard to say       | 40<br>(24)   | 25<br>(15)   |
|   | Satisfied         | 10<br>(6)    | 3.3<br>(2)   |
|   | Very satisfied    | 1.7<br>(1)   | 0<br>(0)     |
|   | Do not know       | 0<br>(0)     | 0<br>(0)     |

Source: Author's 2013 Yangzhou survey experiment. 60 participants were randomly assigned to the control group, and 60 participants were randomly assigned to the treatment group. N=120.

Note: Cell numbers are percentages. The numbers in parentheses are frequencies.

**Table 5.2 Opinions on Demolition and Relocation (Yangzhou Experiment)**

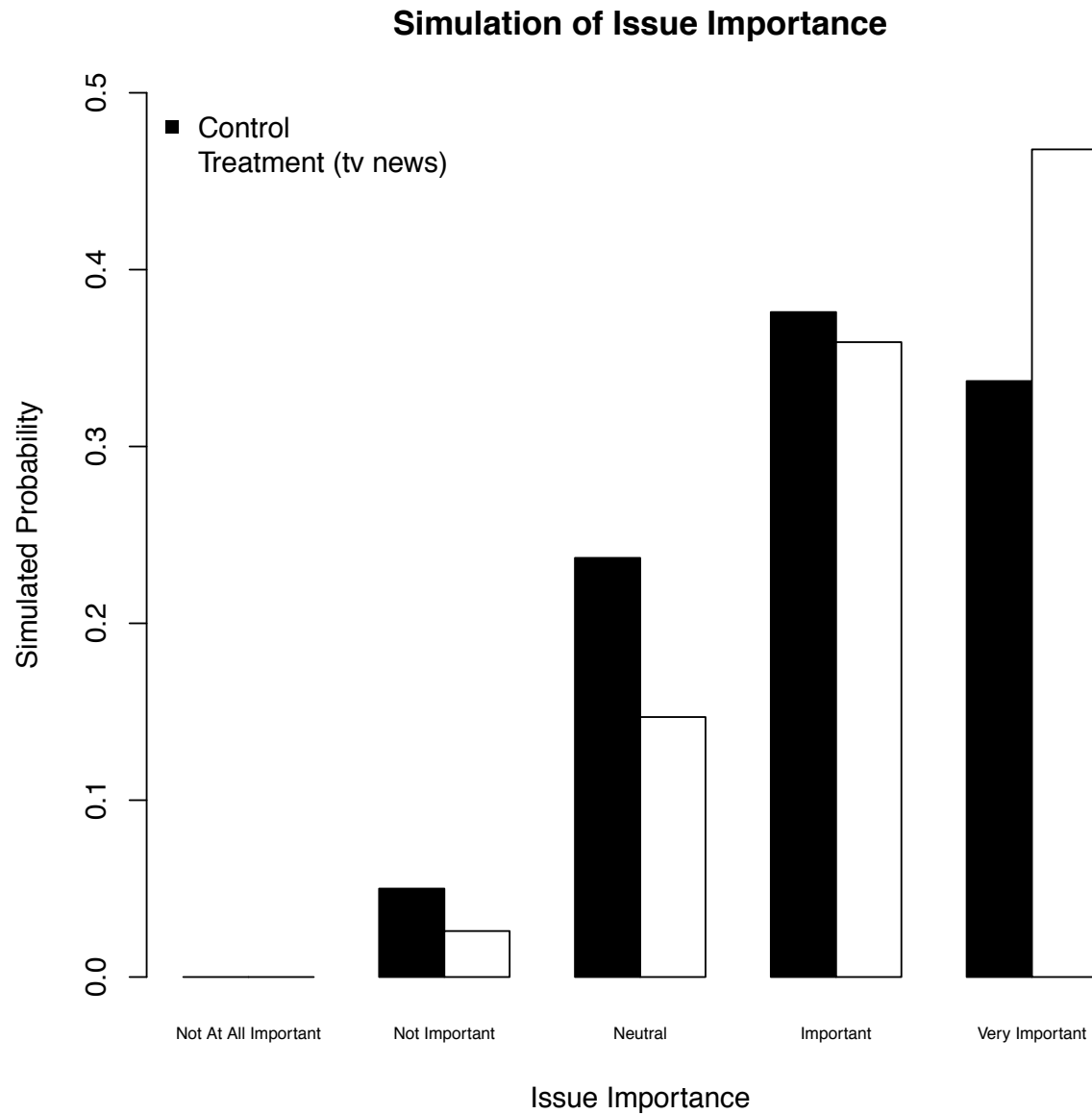
|   | N   | df | Chi-squared | p-value |
|---|-----|----|-------------|---------|
| Q1. Are existing disputes due to demolition and relocation an important social issue? | 120 | 1  | 3.98        | 0.046*  |
| Q3. Are you satisfied with the government's way of handling these disputes?           | 120 | 1  | 9.51        | 0.002** |

Notes: Significance codes: '\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*' 0.01 '\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1.

Kruskal-Willis one-way ANOVA is used to perform the tests.

Simulation based on the statistical results of the experiment shows that participants exposed to the negative news report on demolition are more likely to think the issue of demolition and relocation is important for the society and be more dissatisfied with the government's way of handling the issue, compared to participants in the control group, as shown in Figures 5.1 and 5.2.

**Figure 5.1 Yangzhou Experiment with Adults**



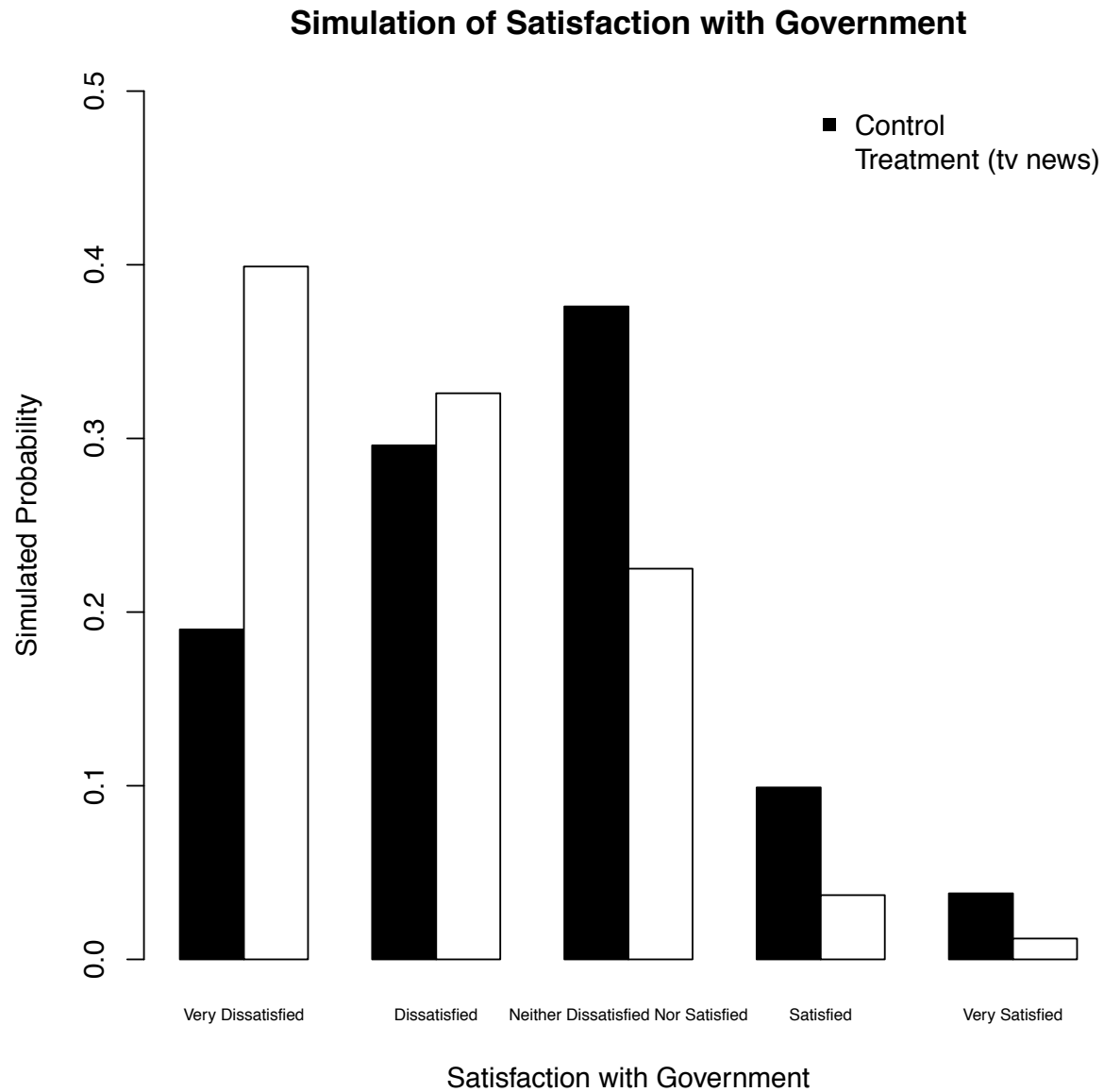
Note:

1. Black bars show simulated probabilities of choosing the categories for participants in the control group. White bars show simulated probabilities when participants are exposed to negative news on demolition and relocation.

2. Simulation is conducted using the R package “ZeligChoice.”

Zelig project citations: Kosuke Imai, Gary King, and Olivia Lau. (2009). “Zelig: Everyone's Statistical Software,” <http://gking.harvard.edu/zelig> and Kosuke Imai, Gary King, and Olivia Lau. (2008). “Toward A Common Framework for Statistical Analysis and Development,” *Journal of Computational and Graphical Statistics*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (December) pp. 892-913.

**Figure 5.2 Yangzhou Experiment with Adults**



Note:

1. Black bars show simulated probabilities of choosing the categories for participants in the control group. White bars show simulated probabilities when participants are exposed to negative news on demolition and relocation.

2. Simulation is conducted using the R package “ZeligChoice.”

Zelig project citations: Kosuke Imai, Gary King, and Olivia Lau. (2009). “Zelig: Everyone's Statistical Software,” <http://gking.harvard.edu/zelig> and Kosuke Imai, Gary King, and Olivia Lau. (2008). “Toward A Common Framework for Statistical Analysis and Development,” *Journal of Computational and Graphical Statistics*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (December) pp. 892-913.



Interestingly, for Question 2, when asked about the confidence in the ultimate solution of the issue, watching a negative television news report does not really affect participants' attitude. This suggests that broadcasting negative news on mass media may serve as a safety valve letting off steam of public anger without sacrificing public confidence in the regime, since disputes do exist, broadly.

Question may arise that individuals living under an authoritarian regime often do not feel free to truthfully answer political questions. This is a legitimate and important concern. However, for this experiment we actually have little reason to worry much about the validity of the answers. Among the three questions, the third question that asks satisfaction with the government is the most sensitive question, because it directly asks the participants to evaluate the performance of the government. As the descriptive statistics show, 29% of the participants chose "very dissatisfied" and 31% of the participants chose "dissatisfied" with the way the government's handling the issue of demolition and relocation. Therefore, if participants are not afraid of voicing their dissatisfaction directly with the government, there is no reason to believe that the participants are not completely honest with the first and second attitude questions.

#### *Xi'an Experiment with University Students*

The second field experiment was conducted among university students at Northwestern University in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province in northwestern China. This experiment also uses posttest-only experimental design, and it has four randomized groups:

- |  |            |
|--|------------|
| Group 1 (Control): No treatment                | → Posttest |
| Group 2 (Treatment): Television news treatment | → Posttest |
| Group 3 (Treatment): Newspaper news treatment  | → Posttest |
| Group 4 (Treatment): Internet news treatment   | → Posttest |

The experiment took place on December 7, 2013. A total of 155 sophomores participated in the experiment. The numbers of students for each group are: 39 in the control group, 36 in the television group, 43 in the newspaper group, 37 in the Internet group. A professor from Northwestern University kindly agreed to use her class time to conduct the experiment. While the course was accounting, students from all majors can enroll in the course. On the day of the experiment, instead of having normal class, the professor first asked for consent of the students who were present that day to participate in an experiment on media effects. After acquiring consent, the professor randomly assigned students into four groups. Specifically, before the experiment I used the table of random numbers to randomly assign students into four groups using the student ID numbers. Based on the group assignments, the professor read the names of the students in each group, in order to inform the students which group they belong to. Next, the professor distributed questionnaires to students of the newspaper group, the Internet group, and the control group. For newspaper and Internet groups, the first pages of the questionnaires are a 500-character news report on a dispute of undercompensated demolition. This passage comes from a television news report, which is the treatment for the television group. I transcribed the news report, and the passages are exactly the same for both the newspaper and the Internet group.

While students of the control, newspaper, and Internet groups are answering the questionnaires, the professor led the students of the television group to another classroom equipped with a computer, the Internet, and a projector. Before distributing the questionnaires, the professor first played a 2-minute video of a news report from a local news program named *Live Broadcasting Xi'an* 直播西安, from which I transcribed the 500-character passage for students in other treatment groups. After finishing playing the video, the professor distributed the

questionnaires to the students. In the end, all students turned in the completed questionnaires. The whole process took about 30 minutes.

In this experiment, I measured opinions on the issue of demolition in particular and democratic attitudes and political efficacy in general. Similar to the statistical analysis of the Yangzhou experiment, since I have ordinal dependent variables, I use Kruskal-Willis ANOVA test. The results show that among the 14 democratic attitudes and political efficacy questions, only 3 attitude questions for which the difference among groups were statistically significant, as shown in Table 5.3. Interestingly, for these 3 democratic attitude questions, exposure to negative news reports does not necessarily drive participants' attitudes toward a more liberal or democratic direction.

**Table 5.3 Treatment Effects on Democratic Attitudes and Political Efficacy (Xi'an Experiment)**

|   | N   | df | Chi-squared | <i>p</i> -value |
|---|-----|----|-------------|-----------------|
| Q43. If people have their different ideas, the society will be chaotic. | 143 | 3  | 8.37        | 0.039*          |
| Q44. Market competition is harmful for social stability.                | 145 | 3  | 12.45       | 0.006**         |
| Q46. Rapid economic development is harmful for social stability.        | 147 | 3  | 9.89        | 0.02*           |

Notes: Significance codes: '\*\*\*' 0.001 '\*\*' 0.01 '\*' 0.05 '.' 0.1.  
Kruskal-Willis one-way ANOVA is used to perform the tests.

Specifically, the first attitude question concerns the statement "If everybody does not share the same thinking, society can be chaotic." The vast majority (83.78%) of the student participants in the control group disagree with the statement. Participants in the treatment groups, however, disagree less with the statement. 64.71% of participants in the television group, 76.19% of participants in the newspaper group, and 80% of participants in the Internet group disagree with the statement. This suggests that the treatments made participants less tolerant.

The second attitude question centers on the statement “Market competition is harmful to social stability.” The vast majority (94.12%) of participants in the control group disagree with this statement. Being exposed to negative news on insufficient compensation for demolition and relocation, no matter through television or newspaper, makes the participants’ economic attitude more conservative, not more liberal. 73.53% of participants in the television group and 88.09% of participants in the newspaper group disagree with the statement. Reading news from the Internet, however, does make the participants’ economic attitude more liberal, as 97.15% of participants in the Internet group disagree with the statement.

The third attitude question concerns the statement “Rapid economic development is harmful to social stability.” Similarly, while the majority (58.33%) of participants in the control group disagree with this statement, being exposed to the negative news through television makes the participants’ economic attitude more conservative, as 42.42% of participants in the television group disagree with the statement. Being exposed to the news from newspaper and the Internet makes the participants’ economic attitude more liberal, as 64.28% of participants in the newspaper group and 77.14% of participants in the Internet group disagree with the statement.

In the Xi’an experiment with university students, I measured non-media factors such as participants’ own experience with demolition and relocation, and frequency of watching television, readings newspaper, and surfing the Internet. This provides an opportunity to examine whether and how individual characteristics affect media effects. When we take into account the potential influence of individual characteristics, the statistical analysis shows that the treatments are not statistically significant any more for the above three attitude questions, but significant for different attitude questions. Personal experience with demolition and relocation, frequency of discussing politics with family and friends, and frequency of receiving news through the three

media outlets became important factors influencing participants' opinions on demolition and relocation in particular as well as their general democratic attitudes and political efficacy.

Table 5.4 shows that for opinions on demolition and relocation specifically, when we take into account the effects of individual characteristics, having experience with demolition and relocation makes participants more likely to be concerned with the issue. Watching television news more frequently makes participants more likely to be dissatisfied with the government's handling of the issue, as simulation results also show in Figures 5.3 and 5.4.

**Table 5.4 Ordinal Logistic Regression Models of Opinions on Demolition and Relocation (Xi'an Experiment with University Students)**

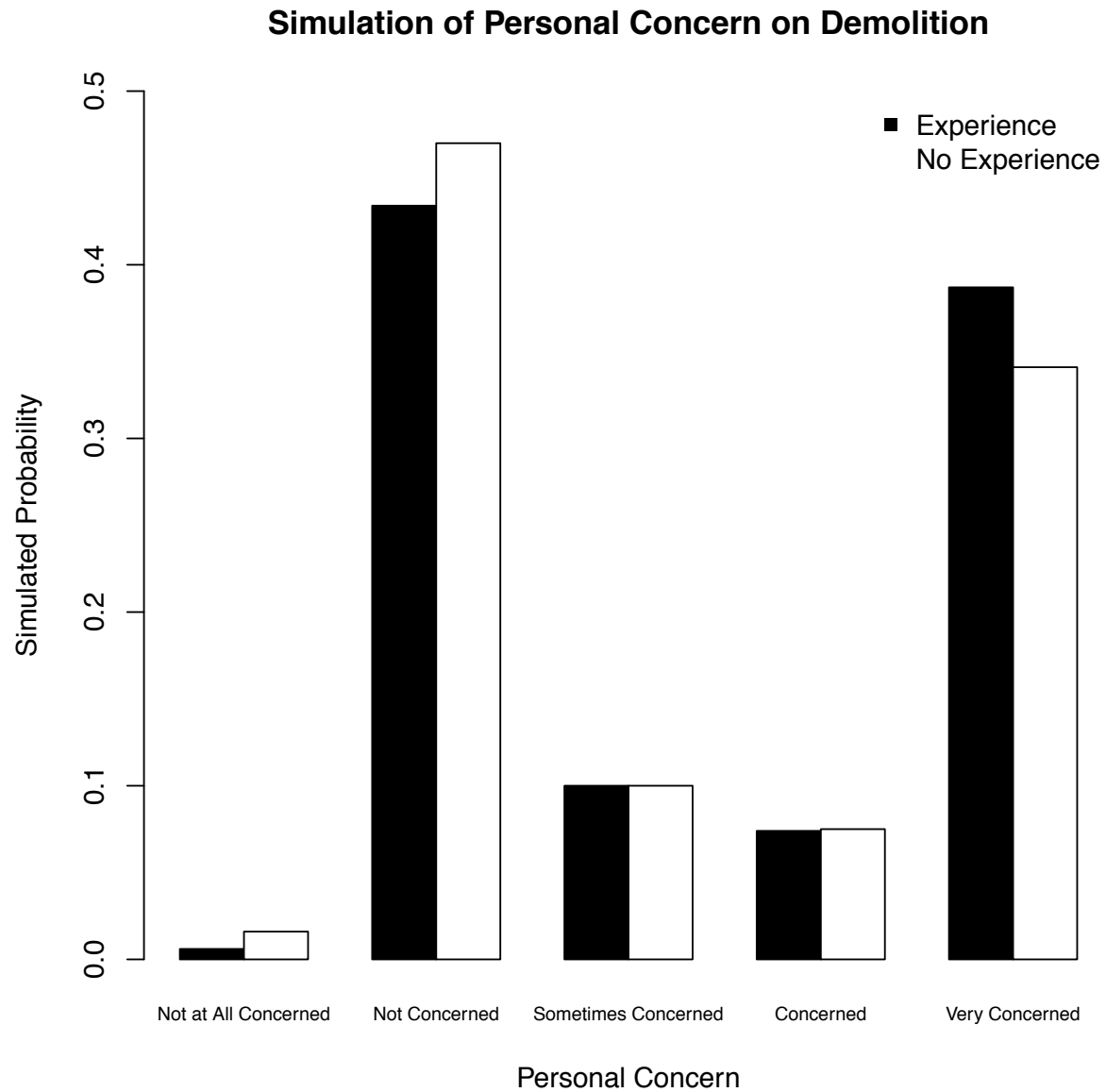
|  | <b>Q23. Personal Concern</b> |              | <b>Q26. Satisfaction with Gov't</b> |             |
|--|------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|-------------|
|  | Coefficient<br>(Std. Error)  | t-value      | Coefficient<br>(Std. Error)         | t-value     |
| Treatment Groups   | 0.01<br>(0.15)               | 0.07         | -0.13<br>(0.16)                     | -0.81       |
| Personal experience with<br>demolition (1=yes; 2=no)               | -1.14<br>(0.32)              | <b>-3.54</b> | -0.18<br>(0.32)                     | -0.57       |
| Discussing politics with friends<br>or family (1=weekly; 5=rarely) | -0.03<br>(0.12)              | -0.29        | -0.22<br>(0.12)                     | -1.79       |
| Frequency watching TV news<br>(1=daily; 5=rarely)                  | -0.11<br>(0.14)              | -0.77        | 0.39<br>(0.15)                      | <b>2.65</b> |
| Frequency reading newspaper<br>(1=daily; 5=rarely)                 | 0.42<br>(0.42)               | 1.00         | -0.16<br>(0.35)                     | -0.46       |
| Frequency reading news online<br>(1=daily; 5=rarely)               | -0.07<br>(0.15)              | -0.45        | 0.15<br>(0.15)                      | 0.96        |

Notes: The questions are:

Q23. "For you personally, how much are you concerned with the issue of demolition and relocation?" (1=Not At All Concerned; 5=Very Concerned)

Q26. "Are you satisfied with the way the government's handling the issue of demolition and relocation?" (1=Very Dissatisfied; 5=Very Satisfied)

**Figure 5.3 Xi'an Experiment with University Students**



Note:

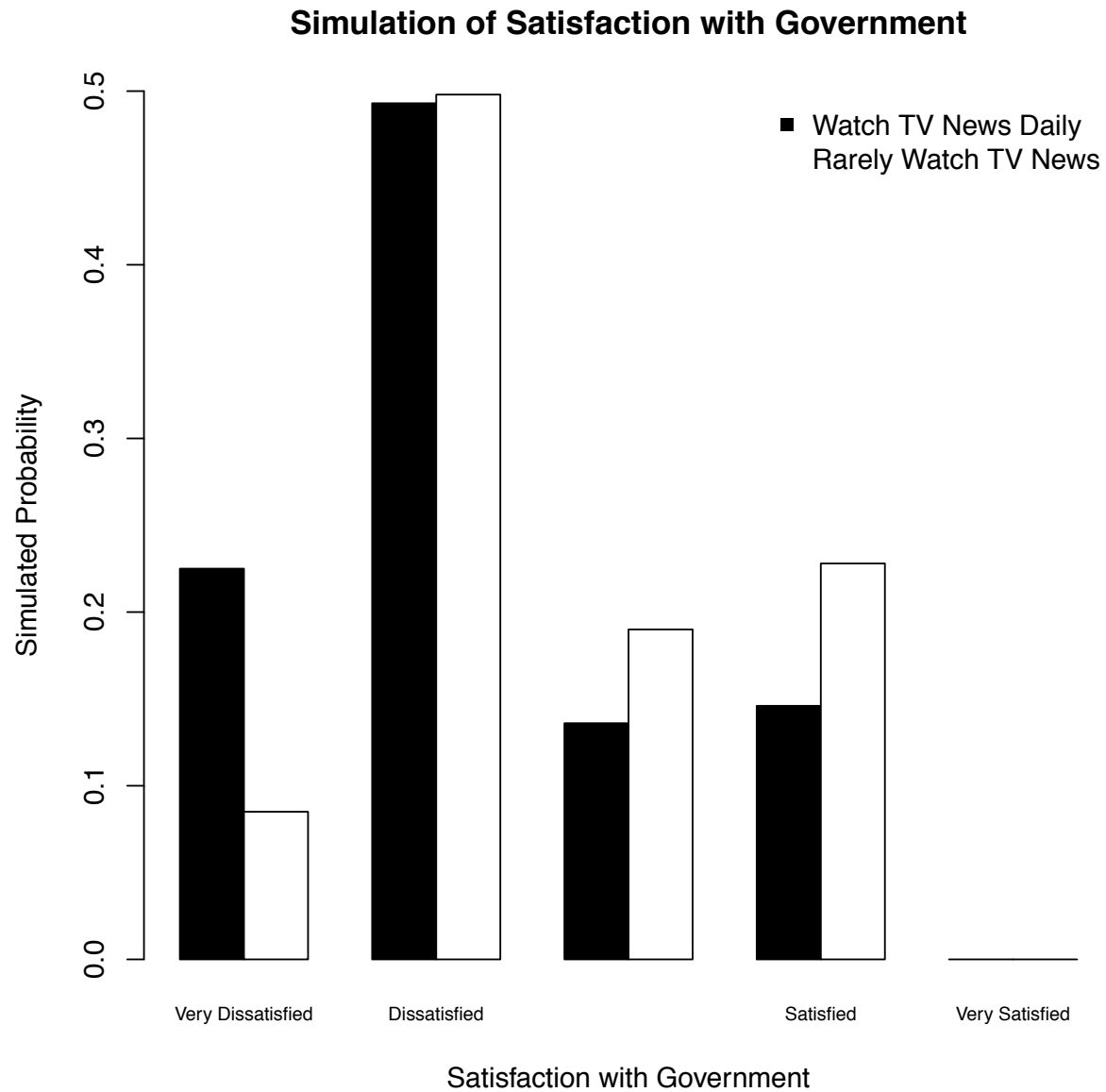
1. Black bars show simulated probabilities of choosing the categories when participants have friends or families who have experience with demolition and relocation. White bars show simulated probabilities when participants do not have such experience.

2. Other variables are held at mode. Treatment group is held at television.

3. Simulation is conducted using the R package “ZeligChoice.”

Zelig project citations: Kosuke Imai, Gary King, and Olivia Lau. (2009). “Zelig: Everyone's Statistical Software,” <http://gking.harvard.edu/zelig> and Kosuke Imai, Gary King, and Olivia Lau. (2008). “Toward A Common Framework for Statistical Analysis and Development,” *Journal of Computational and Graphical Statistics*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (December) pp. 892-913.

**Figure 5.4 Xi'an Experiment with University Students**



Note:

1. Black bars show simulated probabilities of choosing the categories when participants watch television news daily. White bars show simulated probabilities when participants rarely watch television news.
  2. Other variables are held at mode. Treatment group is held at television.
  3. Simulation is conducted using the R package "ZeligChoice."
- Zelig project citations: Kosuke Imai, Gary King, and Olivia Lau. (2009). "Zelig: Everyone's Statistical Software," <http://gking.harvard.edu/zelig> and Kosuke Imai, Gary King, and Olivia Lau. (2008). "Toward A Common Framework for Statistical Analysis and Development," *Journal of Computational and Graphical Statistics*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (December) pp. 892-913.

Table 5.5 shows that for democratic attitudes and political efficacy in general, being exposed to negative news on demolition and relocation significantly affects participants' attitude on public demonstrations and political efficacy. Specifically, being exposed to negative news makes participants more democratic on public demonstrations but less politically efficacious.

**Table 5.5 Effects of Treatment Groups in the Xi'an Experiment with University Students**

| Dependent Variable (1=Strongly Agree; 5=Strongly Disagree)                                       | Coefficient<br>(Std. Error) | t-value |
|--|-----------------------------|---------|
| Q39. Public Demonstrations can easily turn into social disturbances and impact social stability. | 0.32<br>(0.15)              | 2.16    |
| Q48. I don't think the government cares much what people like me think.                          | -0.30<br>(0.15)             | -2.03   |

Notes: R package "Zelig" was used to estimate the ordinal logistic regression models.

Other independent variables are not shown in this table, and they are *experience with demolition*, *discussing politics with family and friends*, *frequency of watching television news*, *frequency of reading newspaper*, and *frequency of reading news online*.

In the model of Q39, the variable *frequency of reading news online* is also statistically significant.

In the model of Q48, no other independent variables are statistically significant.

Table 5.6 shows the effects of discussing politics with family and friends on participants' democratic attitudes and political efficacy. Specifically, discussing politics more often with family and friends makes participants less democratic but more politically efficacious.

**Table 5.6 Effects of Discussing Politics with Family and Friends in the Xi'an Experiment with University Students (1=Almost Weekly; 5=Rarely)**

| Dependent Variable (1=Strongly Agree; 5=Strongly Disagree)                                     | Coefficient<br>(Std. Error) | t-value |
|--|-----------------------------|---------|
| Q42. We need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems.                  | 0.30<br>(0.12)              | 2.50    |
| Q43. If everybody does not share the same thinking, society can be chaotic.                    | 0.27<br>(0.12)              | 2.22    |
| Q49. I feel I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing China. | 0.32<br>(0.12)              | 2.65    |
| Q50. I think I am better informed about politics than most people.                             | 0.26<br>(0.12)              | 2.10    |
| Q52. I feel that I could do as good a job as a cadre as other                                  | 0.27                        | 2.14    |



people. (0.13)

Notes: R package “Zelig” was used to estimate the ordinal logistic regression models.  
Other independent variables are statistically insignificant and not shown in this table, and they are *treatment groups*, *experience with demolition*, *frequency of watching television news*, *frequency of reading newspaper*, and *frequency of reading news online*.

Tables 5.7, 5.8, and 5.9 show the effects of the frequency of receiving news through different media outlets on democratic attitudes and political efficacy. Receiving news through television more often makes participants less politically efficacious, but more so if receiving news through newspaper. Reading news online more often makes participants more democratic. Therefore, the type of media outlet through which participants receive news affects political attitudes as well.

**Table 5.7 Effects of Frequency of Watching Television News in the Xi’an Experiment with University Students (1=Almost Daily; 5=Rarely)**

| Dependent Variable (1=Strongly Agree; 5=Strongly Disagree)              | Coefficient<br>(Std. Error) | t-value |
|---|-----------------------------|---------|
| Q51. I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in politics. | -0.30<br>(0.14)             | -2.08   |

Notes: R package “Zelig” was used to estimate the ordinal logistic regression models.  
Other independent variables are statistically insignificant and not shown in this table, and they are *treatment groups*, *experience with demolition*, *discussing politics with family and friends*, *frequency of reading newspaper*, and *frequency of reading news online*.

**Table 5.8 Effects of Frequency of Reading Newspaper in the Xi’an Experiment with University Students (1=Almost Daily; 5=Rarely)**

| Dependent Variable (1=Strongly Agree; 5=Strongly Disagree)  | Coefficient<br>(Std. Error) | t-value |
|---|-----------------------------|---------|
| Q53. Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on. | -0.72<br>(0.32)             | -2.27   |

Notes: R package “Zelig” was used to estimate the ordinal logistic regression models.  
Other independent variables are statistically insignificant and not shown in this table, and they are *treatment groups*, *experience with demolition*, *discussing politics with family and friends*, *frequency of watching television news*, and *frequency of reading news online*.

**Table 5.9 Effects of Frequency of Reading Online News in the Xi'an Experiment with University Students (1=Almost Daily; 5=Rarely)**

| Dependent Variable (1=Strongly Agree; 5=Strongly Disagree)                                       | Coefficient<br>(Std. Error) | t-value |
|--|-----------------------------|---------|
| Q39. Public Demonstrations can easily turn into social disturbances and impact social stability. | -0.28<br>(0.14)             | -1.98   |
| Q45. If a country has multiple parties, it will lead to political chaos.                         | -0.31<br>(0.15)             | -2.09   |

Notes: R package “Zelig” was used to estimate the ordinal logistic regression models.

Other independent variables are not shown in this table, and they are *treatment groups*, *experience with demolition*, *discussing politics with family and friends*, *frequency of watching television news*, and *frequency of reading newspaper*.

In the model of Q39, the variable *treatment groups* is also statistically significant.

## Discussion

In general, the two field experiments suggest less media effects than we would expect based on previous research on media effects in democratic contexts. In the Xi'an experiment, being exposed to negative news does not change participants' opinions on the issue of demolition and relocation. In the Yangzhou experiment, although the experimental results suggest agenda-setting and priming effects, watching negative news does not undermine public confidence in the ultimate solution of the issue. This implies that critical news on key social issues does not necessarily undermine public confidence in the regime. In fact, critical news may let off the steam of public anger over contentious issues that emerged during China's economic and political development process, which may consolidate, rather than undermine, the authoritarian rule. Previous studies have found that in a more strictly controlled media environment citizens tend to be politically ignorant and apathetic; whereas in a less regulated media environment citizens are more politically knowledgeable and active (Leeson 2008). What is more interesting about the findings here, however, is that even with the exposure to critical news, a rare phenomenon in authoritarian China, citizens' attitudes are not influenced.

More importantly, these results suggest the importance of non-media factors in attitudinal change. As implied by the literature of “two-step flow,” discussing politics with family and friends may be an important factor as family and friends can function as opinion leaders affecting individual attitudes. In this study, the more participants discuss politics with family and friends, the less democratic but the more politically efficacious they tend to be. Other non-media factors such as participants’ own experience with the issue of demolition and relocation tend to increase their perceived importance of the issue.

Frequency of being exposed to television, newspaper, and the Internet also has an effect on attitudinal change. Watching television news more often is associated with less satisfaction with the government’s handling of the demolition issue, but more political efficacy. Reading newspaper more frequently is associated with higher levels of political efficacy. Reading news online more frequently is associated with more democratic attitudes.

The differences among media outlets can be understood with the unique circumstances of media reform and control in China. As parts of the media reform initiated in the 1980s but gained momentum in the 1990s, deregulation, commercialization, and partial privatization (Stockmann 2013) led to more space for news reports. However, television remains to be the most strictly controlled media outlet in China (Shirk 2011). In contrast, certain newspapers, such as *Southern Weekend* and *Caixin*, are known for their outspoken and often critical views on social and political issues. Due to its technological nature, the Internet is controlled differently than the traditional media such as television and newspaper, and it has been used by activists to advance political and social interests (Yang 2009). Partially due to the distinct nature of media outlets and the differing amount of space for reporting, demographic makeup of the audiences for each media outlet varies as well. As a result, consuming news from different media outlets may

further reaffirm audience's political attitudes. This effect is somewhat similar to that in democracies, such as the research finding that watching politically oriented television news, such as MSNBC and Fox News, makes Americans more certain of their beliefs and less willing to weight the merits of opposing views (Levendusky 2013).

\*\*\*

The general lack of effects of critical news in China can be understood through comparison with media effects in other authoritarian states. Next, this chapter draws insights from media studies that center on Taiwan during its pre- and post-democratic periods. The central argument is that, the news effects on public opinion, or lack thereof, may have something to do with the status of the media in relation to the state. The centrality of media-state relations is similar to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) three democratic media system models. In this case, state-controlled media such as in authoritarian countries do not exert much influence on public opinion because they are known to the public as lacking independence. Even with marketized media that enjoy limited freedom, as long as the public holds the assumption of strictly controlled media environment, marketized and Party-sponsored media outlets alike will be thought of as subservient and biased sources of information that favors the political authority. Comparison between China and pre-democratic Taiwan, as well as comparison between pre- and post-democratic Taiwan suggest the above argument.

### **Comparison with the Taiwanese Media**

Before the democratization process started in Taiwan in the late 1980s, the news media were strictly controlled by Kuomintang (KMT), the Leninist party that exercised authoritarian rule over Taiwan from 1949 till the early 1990s (Eberstadt 1992). During the pre-democratic period, Taiwanese media were state-controlled. Specifically, there were four areas that were

especially subject to limitations—criticism of government and officials, the independence movement, Taiwan-Mainland relations, and the military (Kuo 1993). In the late 1980s, the leader of the KMT, Chiang Ching-Kuo decided to open up the political system by reducing social and political control in Taiwan. The martial law was officially lifted by the KMT in 1987, and creation of new political parties was legalized. The media environment also experienced substantial change toward the direction of more press freedom. The restrictions on the four areas mentioned earlier did not exist any more by 1992 (Kuo 1993). Taiwan is labeled “free” in the *Freedom of the Press Report 2013* by Freedom House.

So how does the news effects change along with the change in the independent status of the media in Taiwan, if any? A study (Gunther et al. 1994) conducted in the early 1990s during the height of the political transition to democracy finds that, with the receding state control over the print media, people’s trust in newspaper increased. Moreover, people who were more conscious of the diminishing state control over the news media were more likely to dissociate the two institutions. Less trust in the media is logically associated with less media effects on public opinion. Thus we can reasonably assume that news effects were limited during the pre-democratic period. The finding from another study indirectly suggests this. A study comparing China and post-democratic Taiwan (Wei and Leung 1998) finds that the effect of media exposure on political attitudes is only significant in Taiwan, not China. Indeed, in emerging democracies, news effects, such as the effects of television news on attitudes and vote choices in Mexico during the 2000 presidential election, can be substantial (Lawson and McCann 2005). The observation that the news media exert more influence on public opinion in post-democratic Taiwan than in pre-democratic Taiwan or China can be partly explained by the fact that the coverage of political news is more diversified in a democratic context. Indeed, Lo et al. (1998)

find that during the 1995 Legislative Election in Taiwan, state-owned television stations tend to give greater and favorable coverage to the ruling party than the privately owned cable television channels. This resulted in diluted pro-government bias in media coverage. Diversity in news content and independence of news organizations thus are important to understand the news effects on public opinion.

### **Media Brand and Credibility**

If we say the lack of media independence due to political control is the main reason for the lack of news effects, Stockmann's (2013) finding on media brand and credibility seem to suggest otherwise. In her study, Stockmann conducted a field experiment in Beijing on the effects of media brand on public opinion. Specifically, she finds that nonofficial papers have higher levels of credibility than official papers. This result, however, does not necessarily contradict with the results in this chapter, although it differs from the results here in two ways. First, the issue that Stockmann used in her study was perceived effectiveness of the national labor law, and the treatment used in the experiment was positive news reports of labor disputes being successfully solved, suggesting the effectiveness of labor law. Therefore, the treatment was positive reports, rather than negative news. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, the support for the central leadership in China is higher than not only local governments in China but also that in democracies. Thus successful solution of labor disputes may conform to the already high confidence in the central leadership, as reflected in the belief in the effectiveness of the law. Second, Stockmann (2013) tested the effects of newspaper reports whereas I tested television news in this chapter. There can be substantial difference regarding different forms of news media. Chinese television is most strictly controlled among all forms of media in China (Shirk 2011).

Thus it is possible that the Chinese public places higher trust in print media than television. As a result, they are more subject to the influence of newspaper reports.

Despite the differences, the results presented in this chapter do not contradict with the varying levels of credibility among different Chinese news outlets. Indeed, reputation of news organizations is an important indicator of its audience size, demographics of the audience, and profitability of the news organization. In other words, news organizations differ, sometimes substantially, in terms of influence among the public. Moreover, the results presented in this chapter do not necessarily mean that Chinese media are not trustworthy and do not have any influence on the Chinese public. In fact, survey data from 2008 suggests a great amount of trust the Chinese public places in the news media, although such trust is likely to decrease with higher education levels and more online news exposure (Xu 2013).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, contrary to the assumption of news effects on public opinion, critical news on contentious social issues does not affect public opinion much, at least not to the extent of undermining public confidence in the regime's governing capability. Taking into account the findings from the first part of this dissertation, the experimental results suggest that while criticism in news exists in the fractured censorship system, it does not necessarily undermine public perceptions of the party-state. Criticism serves distinct interests of the central government and local officials. It can also be a result of journalistic aspirations and the commercial interests of news organizations. However, these fractures do not challenge the legitimacy or perceived governing capability of the regime. As emphasized earlier, fractures do not mean fault lines. In fact, criticism coming out of such a fractured censorship system is only mildly critical in the sense that producers of such critical news generally do not even intend to challenge the regime.

Based on this, the nature of such criticism is already “benign,” and such benign criticism does not adversely affect public opinion toward the regime. If this is true, then criticism in news actually helps prolong authoritarian duration in China through two mechanisms: (1) It releases steam of public anger over contentious social issues; at the same time, (2) it does not adversely affect public confidence in the political regime’s governing capability, a basis for continuing political legitimacy.



## **Chapter 6 State-Controlled Media and Authoritarian Duration**

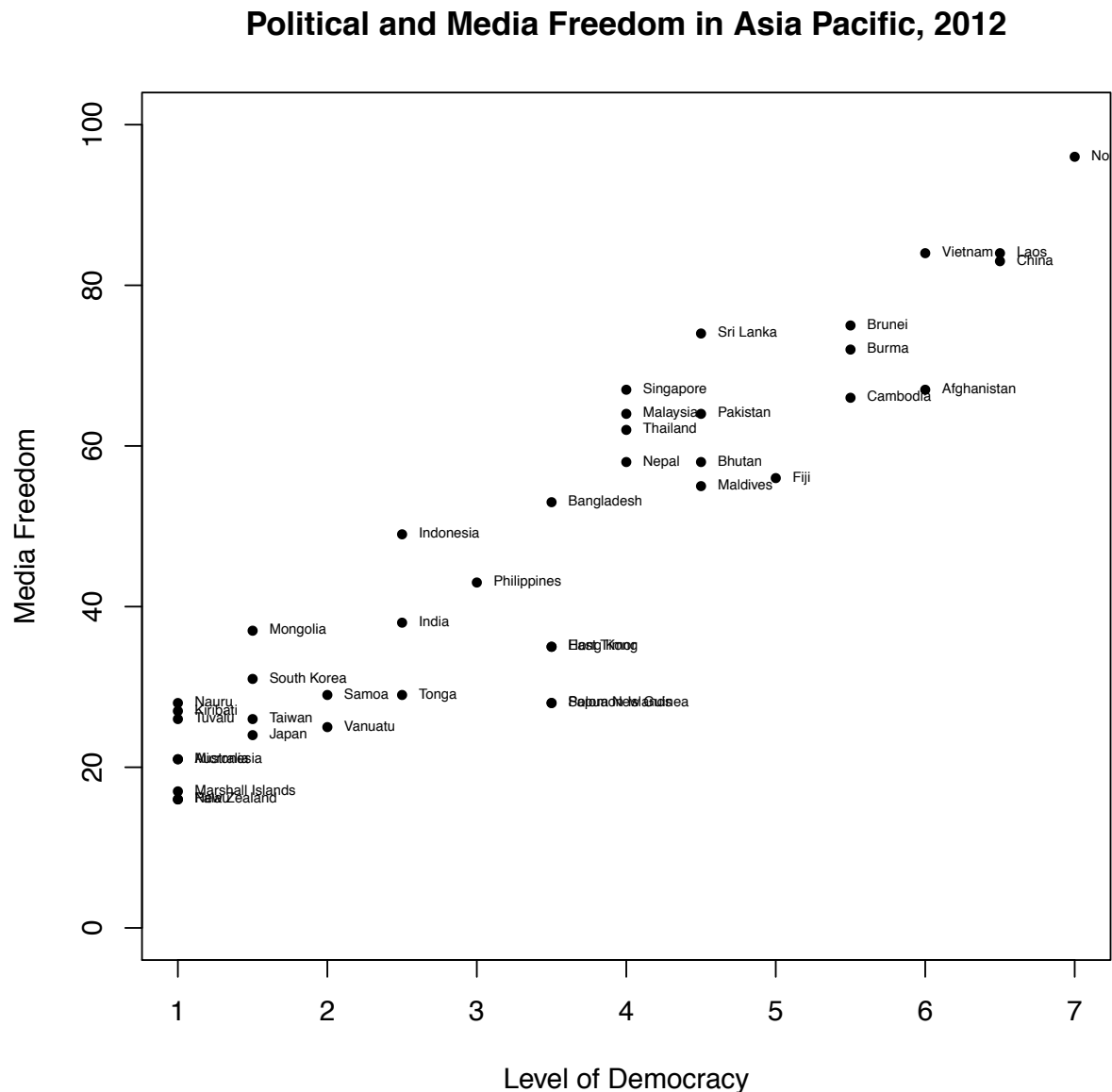
In the study of Comparative Politics, the strong correlation between level of economic development and level of democracy is among the few well-established empirical correlations. Beyond this, the correlation between level of political development and media freedom is another strong empirical observation. Based on the ratings by Freedom House, there is a strong linear correlation between level of democracy and media freedom in Asia Pacific, as shown in Figure 6.1. The more authoritarian a country is, the less media freedom there is. Indeed, it is a reasonable assumption to connect the lack of political freedom with the lack of media freedom. However, the actual situations of the lack of media freedom and the political role of the news media are country-specific. This is similar to the different forms of authoritarianism that are consequential to the democratization paths they may later take on (Geddes 1999). Based on the case of China, this study proposes the paradigm of fractured censorship system to understand the political role of the news media in authoritarian duration in China.

### **The Fractured Censorship System**

The essence of limiting media freedom for nondemocratic regimes is twofold. Simply put, it is to control what should be reported and what should not be reported, that is, to limit criticism that is harmful to the image of the regime and to increase positive reports that are beneficial to the regime. Based on this logic, nondemocratic regimes would have little incentive to allow any kind of reports critical of the regime, implicitly or explicitly. In other words, censorship should be inclusive and effective. However, during the complex trajectory of institutional and policy evolution due to the need of authoritarian duration, different actors in the Chinese media landscape—the party-state, news organizations, and journalists—have

developed distinct interests that sometimes grant them with the consistent choice of critical news. This constitutes fractures in the censorship system. The variations in these actors' interests determine when fractures appear and how deep they are.

**Figure 6.1 Political and Media Freedom in Asia Pacific, 2012**



Data Source: Freedom House.

Note: Scores of media freedom comes from Freedom of the Press 2013, with 0 being free and 100 being least free. Scores of level of democracy comes from Freedom in the World 2013, with 1 being most democratic and 7 being least democratic.

Fractures are not fault lines. Fractured censorship does not mean diminishing effectiveness of the censorship system. Instead, it means the scope of the content that should be censored may be shrinking when actors' interests converge to pursue critical news. The only exception is when mid-level censors receive bribes from news organizations and loosen up the supposedly tight belt of censorship, as discussed in Chapter 3.

More specifically, the political fractures discussed in Chapter 2 happen when the central leadership needs to use the news media to monitor local officials and to ensure local compliance, and when local leaders need to use the news media to establish personal authority. Due to the institutional features of the Chinese party-state, the central leadership always needs to keep an eye on local noncompliance. However, the extent of monitoring through the news media depends on the time and issue areas. During political campaigns such as the anticorruption campaign launched in 2012, the news media may have more space for critical reporting. For local leaders, they may also intentionally use the news media to achieve personal political goals. Criticizing local officials in this context is often limited to officials below a certain level during a specific time span. In the case study examined in Chapter 2, only officials below the bureau chief level can be criticized, and only during the time when the provincial head thinks criticism is necessary. The provincial head is able to close the political fracture when he thinks the criticism is enough. Therefore, these political fractures indicate intentional use of critical news by political actors to achieve well-defined political goals. In other words, these fractures do not imply lost effectiveness of the censorship system. Rather, they are voluntarily allowed by the party-state.

Because of the persistent nature of strict control over the news media by the party-state in China, the market fractures and journalistic fractures can only happen when experienced journalists find ways either to get around officials' opposition or to play into the disagreements

among political factions. Of course, both have risks and are highly precarious. In the case of *The Beijing News* report on black jails discussed in Chapter 4, for example, if the result was that the conservative faction won over the reform faction, then the news story would undoubtedly be retracted and the editor-in-chief of *The Beijing News* would be punished.

Therefore, there are three key points to the framework of the fractured censorship system. First, although conventional wisdom reasonably assumes inclusive and effective censorship system in authoritarian countries, when we examine the relationship between politics and the media in China closely, we would find that political criticism widely exists in the Chinese media discourse, only the level of criticism varies across time and among different news outlets. In other words, the censorship system is fractured. Second, however, fractures do not necessarily lead to eventual collapse of the censorship system. Or at least we cannot assume so based on the current evidence. The political fractures are voluntary adoption of critical news by various political actors. The market and journalistic fractures only happen when news professionals can find political interests consistent with critical news. All this suggests that the party-state still has the full grasp of media control. Finally, as implied by the second point, the three types of fractures discussed in this study are in actuality intricately related. I give them different names and discuss them in separate chapters only for analytical purposes. In the news production process, negotiations among the three actors—the party-state, news organizations, and journalists—are constant and interrelated. The dominant force among the three actors is the party-state, represented by leadership and officials at various levels. While news organizations and journalists can push for more space of critical reporting, the party-state ultimately decides which fractures can stay open and for how long.

Corruption is the exception when these fractures are not voluntarily allowed by the party-state. As discussed in Chapter 3, top executives of online portal websites use gift cards to bribe mid-level censors in order to publish reports that dwell at the borderline of censorship. So far, such corruption only exists at the margin and the concession given by the censors is only mild at best. In the case of 163.com, the concession given by the censors is only lighter forms of punishment. But punishment still needs to be carried out. In this sense, fractures unintended by the party-state do exist, but they do not yet pose major threat to the effectiveness of the censorship system.

### **Limited Effects of Critical News on Public Opinion**

Most critical news is intentionally allowed by the party-state to exist in the Chinese media discourse. The next question is whether and how does such critical news affect public opinion. After all, the intended audience of the critical news is ordinary citizens, and their perception of the regime is essential to understanding authoritarian duration in China.

There are at least two sources from which we can draw insights to shed light on the case of China. First, the research on media effects in democracies is a well-developed area. Indeed, agenda-setting, priming, and framing effects are among the most common media effects that are thoroughly studied and practiced by campaign strategists. All this directly suggests strong media effects on public opinion. However, such strong media effects also come with a strong premise, that is, the media outlets in democracies operate in a regulated but generally free media environment. Consequently, citizens in democracies have the freedom and the options to choose media outlets with diverse opinions and dispositions. The general assumption and belief in media integrity and a free media environment partly constitute the conditions for strong media effects. This also separates democratic from authoritarian media environments. In an authoritarian

country like China, it is never a secret that media outlets are strictly controlled by the party-state, and official media outlets such as *People's Daily* and CCTV are the mouthpieces of the CCP. Given such realization, it would be reasonable to question whether theories of media effects derived from democracies apply to media outlets operating within authoritarian environments.

The second source of insight is existing research on the news effects of Chinese media. However, such research tends to be outdated, as the Chinese media landscape changes frequently as a result of media marketization. For example, using survey results, Chen and Shi (2001) find that more exposure to the state-controlled media leads to more negative attitudes toward the CCP regime. This finding directly challenges the very effects of propaganda, the premise to understand the role of the media in authoritarian states. However, this study is based on surveys conducted in 1993 and 1994, and it does not really address the effects of *critical* news.

Given the two sources of insight, we may come to two conclusions. First, media theories derived from democracies may not apply to authoritarian states, as the relationships between the media and the government are drastically different. Second, previous research on media effects in China suggests that while media effects on public opinion may exist, they may surprise us with an opposite direction of influence. Given all this, the task to examine whether and how critical news affects public opinion on key social issues is imminent.

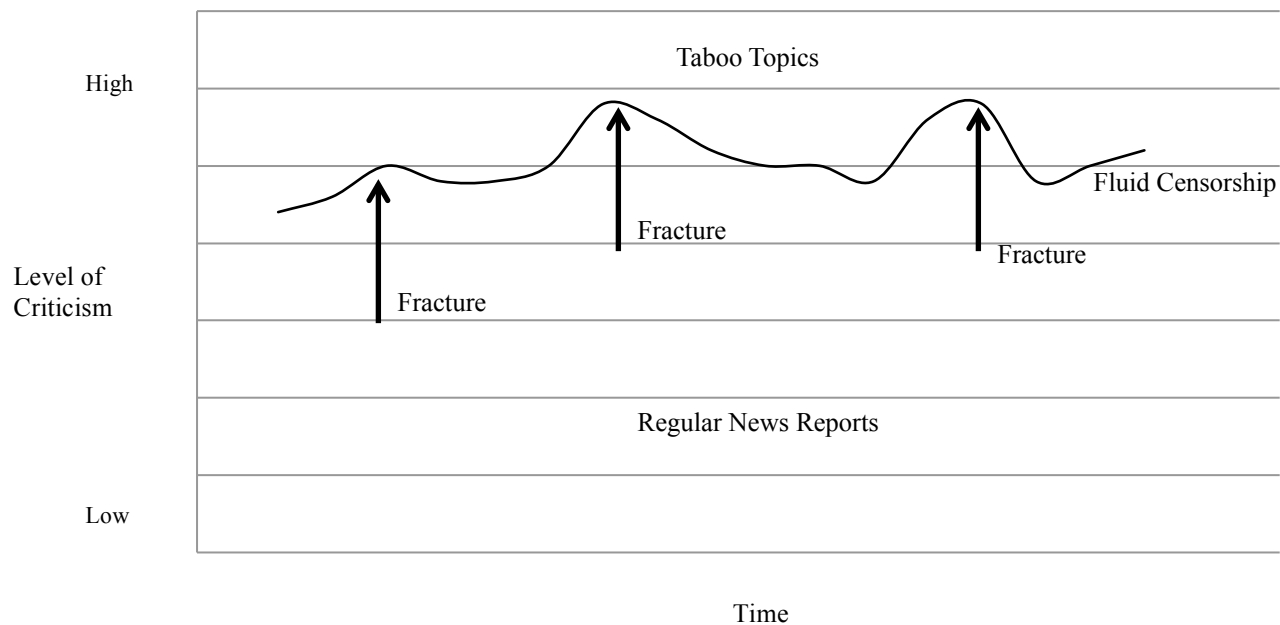
Using a contentious issue in China—demolition and relocation, I conducted two field experiments with adults and university students in east and central China, respectively. The main findings are twofold. First, exposure to negative reports on demolition and relocation may lead the public to be more dissatisfied with the government's handling of the issue, but it does not undermine the public's confidence in the capability of the party-state to ultimately solve the problem. This means that critical news functions like the valve of a high-pressure cooker, letting

out the steam of public anger. In return, the party-state may be able to keep its positive image among the public intact while buying time to solve difficult social issues. Second, non-media factors are important in attitudinal change. For example, discussing politics with family and friends may be an important factor as family and friends can function as opinion leaders affecting individual attitudes. Moreover, participants' own experience with demolition and relocation tend to increase their perceived importance of the issue. These findings together suggest that critical news is able to let off steam of public anger without compromising the legitimacy of the regime. Moreover, when compared to other sources of attitudinal change such as personal experience with controversial issues, the effects of critical news only become more insignificant.

Therefore, the general thesis of this dissertation can be summarized in Figure 2. Contrary to the established perception that censorship, the major form of media control, is inclusive and effective, the censorship system in China is actually fractured. The sources of fractures include distinct political interests of the central and local governments, the commercial interests of news organizations, and journalistic aspirations for in-depth and truthful reporting. Such fractures allow sporadic criticisms on local governments and officials. However, fractures are not fault lines. The central and local governments *intentionally* use the news media to achieve political goals. They are the ultimate authority that allows critical news when commercial interest and journalistic aspirations push for critical reporting. Therefore, while fractures may temporarily enlarge the space for critical reporting, they do not imply diminishing effectiveness of the censorship system. After critical news is produced and broadcasted or published, it only has limited effects on public opinion. While critical news may lead the public to be more dissatisfied toward local governments on contentious social issues, it does not undermine the public's

confidence in the capability of the regime to ultimately solve those problems. In other words, critical news is able to blow off steam of public anger over contentious issues without compromising the legitimacy of the regime. In this way, the fractured censorship system facilitates authoritarian duration through intentionally allowing critical news at local levels while maintaining the overall effective censorship system.

**Figure 6.2 The Fractured Censorship System in China**



### **What Has Been Seen Cannot Be Unseen**

While the party-state may intentionally use critical news to achieve political goals, we cannot ignore the capability of Chinese journalists and Internet users to creatively get around censorship. Indeed, even though the party-state still firmly controls all media outlets in China, especially for the Internet due to its interactive technological nature, Chinese Internet users have



used puns, homophonic characters to avoid censorship. An important consequence of this is that, certain ideas deemed by the regime as sensitive or even subversive, can be spread around, as ideas may be wiped off the cyberspace, but may not be wiped off from people's minds.

Unlike traditional media such as television and newspaper, the control techniques for the Internet are somewhat different. For television and newspaper, the content of news has to be reviewed, sometimes multiple times, before broadcast or publication. Although in certain cases due to the commercial interests and journalistic aspirations, reports that cross or border the often-ambiguous red lines may be publicized, in general these two types of media outlets tend to be strictly regulated prior to publication and broadcast. The instances of sensitive or critical reports are thus rare. For the Internet, on the other hand, because of its interactive and instantaneous nature, there are potentially tens of millions of Internet users that can publish texts at the same time, such as on the most popular microblogging website in China Sina Weibo. This poses a substantial difficulty for the party-state to monitor and control every single post on such popular social media sites.

Currently, social media sites such as Sina Weibo are required by the party-state to use both machine censors and human censors. For machine censors, computer software is programmed to pick out and delete online posts with certain sensitive words. The list of sensitive words changes daily, and only grows longer<sup>48</sup>. However, critical news, commentary, and ideas can be phrased in multiple ways, so deleting online posts through detecting key words cannot fully censor online content. According to the recent reports by Reuters in 2013<sup>49</sup>, besides the posts that contain “must kill” words and thus are automatically deleted by computer censors,

---

<sup>48</sup> For a detailed discussion of why certain words become “sensitive,” as defined by the Chinese party-state, see Ng (2013).

<sup>49</sup> The Reuters report can be found here: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/12/us-china-internet-idUSBRE98A18Z20130912>

human censors read and decide which posts to spare or delete. Through these two layers of censorship, the Chinese party-state exercises firm control over the content in the cyberspace. According to King et al. (2013)<sup>50</sup>, Internet companies hire 2-3 censors for every 50,000 users. Based on this estimate, for example, Sina Weibo hires at least 2,400 human censors to monitor posts. Each censor has to go through at least 3,000 posts an hour, according to the Reuters report. However, due to the instantaneous nature of the Internet and the large volume of cyber content, savvy Chinese Internet users find that there is a short time window between posting critical comments and comments being deleted. Specifically, although posts on Sina Weibo may be deleted if the content is considered politically sensitive, active and savvy citizens may use a number of techniques such as puns and homophonic characters to avoid automated computer deletion. Since human deletion takes time, in that usually short time window, those sensitive posts can be read by a large number of Sina Weibo users. Some users may also take screenshots of the posts and later re-post the comments. In this way, even though human censors will eventually delete the posts, the impact of such critical posts cannot be easily wiped out from people's minds. The impact stays. In other words, what has been seen cannot be unseen. Repetition of this process can change the political boundary in public discourse normally set by the party-state. Moreover, during this process, due to the unique social and political reality in contemporary Chinese society, Chinese Internet users have developed a distinct satirical style of online discourse that sometimes spills offline. This is discussed in the examples below.

Before continuing the discussion, it is important to note that the Internet itself is only a platform through which a number of activities can take place. Consuming news and voicing opinions are two activities that the majority of Chinese Internet users do *not* engage in. In fact, the majority of Chinese Internet users go online for entertainment. 77.3% of Chinese Internet

---

<sup>50</sup> This working paper can be accessed here: <http://gking.harvard.edu/files/gking/files/experiment.pdf>

users used online music, 59.5% played online games, 48.8% used social networking websites, only 41.4% read online literature (CNNIC 2013<sup>51</sup>). Among the already minority Internet users, only a handful of them function as discourse entrepreneurs that revise and invent new words and phrases with distinct perspectives and understandings of current events. The new language that the discourse entrepreneurs developed then circle around who I call elite Internet users that are truly concerned about social and political problems and use the Internet mainly for news and opinions. They tend to be more educated, technologically savvy, and young. Therefore, the phenomenon that I analyze here does not, in any ways, represent the general situation of Chinese online discourse. On the contrary, the online discourse I analyze here only circles around a small group of people. Nevertheless, ideas created and spread around are not easily wiped out. With an effective and swift online censorship system in place, websites can be closed down and posts can be deleted, but ideas cannot be deleted, or at least not as easily. Next, this chapter analyzes the patterns of the birth and circulation of online critical discourse and discusses the techniques that elite Internet users use to prolong the existence and impact of critical comments and ideas through two specific examples.

#### *Homophonic Words--“Harmony” 和谐 and “River Crab” 河蟹*

“Harmonious society” is a slogan put forward by the Hu Jintao Administration (2003-2012), the fourth generation of Chinese leaders. In 2006 the CCP issued *Resolution on Constructing Socialist Harmonious Society*<sup>52</sup>. According to the Resolution, harmonious society has several indicators, including democratic legal system, social justice, social order, and harmonious coexistence between humans and the nature. The CCP identified several obstacles to achieving a harmonious society—inequality between rural and urban China, environmental

---

<sup>51</sup> The report can be accessed at <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201302/P020130221391269963814.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> The full report can be accessed at <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/4932440.html>

problems, unemployment, social stability, corruption and so on. As vague as it is, the notion of harmonious society dominated Chinese political discourse since 2006 till the end of the Hu Jintao era. Indeed, political campaigns and study groups were launched to study and practice harmonious society. Because of the highly comprehensive nature of the slogan, any economic, social, and political activities especially in government organs and state-owned enterprises were titled as being part of constructing a harmonious society.

The public's understanding of the notion of harmonious society, however, is not necessarily consistent with the original proposal. In the Chinese cyberspace, for example, elite Internet users developed a quite satirical interpretation of harmonious society. With the central issue of concern being Internet censorship in particular and lack of speech freedom in general, elite Internet users mocked the notion of harmonious society without any belief that the CCP is sincerely more concerned about social ills than its own existence. For them, harmonious society is just another political slogan created by Hu Jintao, so that he, like his predecessors, has contributions to the CCP governing lexicon as his political legacy. In addition to not believing in the notion of harmonious society, elite Internet users mock "harmonious society" by referring to Internet censorship as criticism or sensitive information being "harmonized." Because of this, "harmonized" became a sensitive word itself to be detected by machine censors and deleted (Ng 2013). As a result, elites Internet users used homophonic characters "river crab" 河蟹 to replace "harmonized" 和谐. These two words have very similar pronunciations, but because the characters differ, elite Internet users were able to get around machine censors and post comments containing "river crab" and express the same meaning.

This is an example of how elite Internet users, despite the sophisticated Internet censorship regime, actively and creatively get around censorship and successfully communicate

ideas amongst themselves. Although the Internet is strictly controlled by the party-state, it can also function as “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985) by carrying distinct forms of discourse, such as homophonic words. In this way, political criticism can live in the cyberspace.

### *Screenshots of Online Posts*

Some elite Internet users have ample experience of online posts being deleted due to censorship. Repetition of such experience leads some elite Internet users to acquire a good sense of what posts may be deemed as sensitive. However, this does not dampen their decision to continue posting sensitive comments. One of the journalists I interviewed shared with me his experience of using Chinese Twitter—Sina Weibo—to participate in a small-scale public protest over a misjudged civil case.

The case involves a close friend of the journalist who I refer to as Zhu. Zhu has a close friend and mentor who was a former senior editor at a popular magazine in Shanghai. The editor’s wife was a businesswoman who was wrongfully accused of bribery, according to Zhu. In order to publicize the case and use public pressure to change the verdict of case, Zhu and his friends decided to use Sina Weibo to organize a small-scale public gathering in support of Zhu’s wife outside of the courthouse, on the day of the trial. However, as a veteran journalist, Zhu is well aware of the boundaries in the Chinese cyberspace, especially when it comes to public gatherings (King et al. 2013). Therefore, Zhu and his friends carefully designed a strategy to ensure successful delivery of the message and the happening of the gathering.

First, instead of using the Chinese words “public gathering” in the actual the content of the tweet, Zhu and his friends used “taking a stroll.” This is a common surrogate word for demonstration, protest, or gathering among the elite Internet users. Second, even if “public gathering” was replaced with “taking a stroll,” thus reducing the chance of being detected and

deleted by machine censors, Zhu and his friends knew that this was still a sensitive tweet that would have been eventually deleted by human censors. Therefore, Zhu and his friends, a group of about a dozen people, decided to post the tweet at the exact same time. The purpose was to make sure the post be seen by as many Internet users as possible, because each person has a different group of followers on Sina Weibo. Third, right after the post was published on Sina Weibo, Zhu and his friends took screenshots of the post, so that they could re-post the screenshots after the original post was deleted. Moreover, screenshots cannot be easily detected by machine censors, as they are not in text formats. Therefore, it would take longer for human censors to delete the posts as they have to read carefully over the content captured in the screenshot pictures.

On the day of the trial, Zhu said he was surprised by the number of people who showed up. It was way above his expectation. He estimated that at least 100 people gathered outside the courthouse to support the editor's wife. Unfortunately, the public support was not able to change the guilty verdict. But Zhu told me that the experience of using Sina Weibo to make a public gathering happen led him to form an optimistic view on Chinese social media. Despite strict censorship, Zhu said, the social media is the form of media with the most potential to spread around information and ideas and to mobilize the ordinary citizens.

\*\*\*

The fractured censorship system can be understood as part of the authoritarian resilience (Nathan 2003) embodied by the Chinese Communist regime. During the course of more than six decades of political rule over Mainland China, the CCP and its governance have been evolving. The CCP has transformed the relationship between politics and the media from the media being a mere propaganda tool to the media having limited autonomy over the content. This reflects an

effective adaptation of the CCP in sustaining its authoritarian rule. Because of the limited autonomy granted to the Chinese media, the CCP is able to use critical news to achieve its political goals in various realms of authoritarian duration such as ensuring local compliance and establishing political leader's authority. Such critical news helps blow off the steam of public anger over contentious issues without compromising the overall legitimacy of the regime. In this way, most critical news that we observe in the Chinese media discourse actually consolidates, rather than undermine, the authoritarian rule in China.

## Appendix

### Sources and Research Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to data collection. Specifically, it uses semi-structured interviews, direct observation, content analysis, a survey, and two field experiments to collect qualitative and quantitative data. This chapter details the research methods, with a focus on issues such as sources and data collection process that have implications on inference.

#### Sources of Data for Analysis

Original data comes from a three-month fieldwork in North, Central, and East China over the summers of 2012 and 2013. I travelled to Nanjing in Jiangsu province, Yangzhou in Jiangsu province, Shanghai, Beijing, Xi'an in Shaanxi province, and Wuhan in Hubei province for semi-structured interviews and direct observation. I also conducted telephone interviews with journalists and scholars from Beijing, Changchun in Jilin province, Guangzhou in Guangdong province, and Yangzhou in Jiangsu province. The research sites are shown on the map of China in Figure 7.1. In total I conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with journalists, editors, producers, and scholars and a three-week direct observation<sup>53</sup> at a municipal-level Yangzhou television station in Jiangsu province. Direct observation focused on the production process of a local television news show *Attention*, including selection and presentation of news stories, staff meetings, on-site reporting, and write-up of news scripts by journalists and editors. The observation on the production process is valuable to this study, because for most Chinese, television remains to be the most important source of news. Although new media such as online news portals and blogs are easily accessible to foreign scholars, they do not represent the major

---

<sup>53</sup> Direct observation used in this project is nonparticipant, overt and semi-structured (Johnson and Reynolds 2012).



source of news for most Chinese. For example, in the 2005 World Values Survey, 75.3% of respondents reported that they used news broadcast on radio or television the last week to obtain information, while 23.2% and 10.9% of respondents reported that they used daily newspaper and the Internet the last week to obtain information, respectively. Similarly, according to the 2008 China Survey, 76.31% of respondents reported to have watched television for one hour or more the day before, while 16.72% and 7.52% of respondents reported to have spent one hour or more reading newspapers and surfing the Internet the day before, respectively.

**Figure 7.1 Research Sites in China**



Quantitative data are collected through (1) a survey conducted among journalists working at a municipal-level Changchun television station in Jilin province, (2) content analysis of the news scripts of *Attention* aired on Yangzhou television from December of 2011 to July of 2013, and (3) two field experiments conducted in Yangzhou and Xi'an with adults and university students, respectively. The experiment conducted in Xi'an was administered by a faculty member at the Northwest Socioeconomic Development Research Center (NSDRC) in Xi'an, Shaanxi province. Details on the design and procedures of the field experiments are discussed in Chapter 6.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

In the summer of 2012, I conducted three semi-structured interviews, through whom I acquired further contacts for the twenty-four semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer of 2013. While most interviews were conducted in interviewees' offices, some were conducted in coffee shops and over telephone. Interviewees can be classified into three groups: news professionals, journalism scholars, and journalism graduate students. The interviews centered on the news production process, problems with news production, understandings of the functions of news in a society, and the relationship between the news media and the government in China.

News professionals: 21

Journalism scholars: 4

Journalism graduate students: 2

## **Direct Observation**

I stayed for three weeks at Yangzhou Television Station in June 2013. I followed journalists working for the news show *Attention*, observing the processes of selecting news topics, contacting sources, conducting interviews, shooting video footage, writing and revising news scripts. I also attended two staff meetings where the producer of the show commented on the previous week's news episodes. During the direct observation process, I asked the journalists questions related to the stories they were working on and news production in general. This was a non-participant direct observation.

## **A Survey with Television Journalists**

The survey was conducted in Changchun in July 2013. The results of the survey are discussed in Chapter 5. Originally I planned to travel to Changchun, Jilin province and conduct the survey. However, in July 2013 a fire broke out in a poultry company in Jilin province, killing 121 people and injured 76. Due to the scale of the tragedy, it became a sensitive topic for news reporting because the government was afraid of public anger over the casualties and accusations of incompetence. Therefore, my contact at Changchun Television Station suggested me abandon the travel plan, as I may not be able to collect any information during a sensitive time period. Instead, he offered to administer the survey for me. As a result, I sent my contact the survey questionnaires. He distributed the questionnaires to the journalists on July 15, and collected them on July 16. After this, he sent the questionnaires back to me, and I typed and saved the answers in electronic format.

## Bibliography

- Acemoglu, Daron, & Robinson, James A. (2006). *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Aronson, Elliott, Ellsworth, Phoebe C., Carlsmith, J. Merrill, & Gonzales, Marti Hope. (1990). *Methods of Research in Social Psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Art, David. (2012). What Do We Know About Authoritarianism After Ten Years? *Comparative Politics*, 44(3), 351-373.
- Berman, Paul. (1978). The Study of Macro- and Micro-Implementation. *Public Policy*, 26(2), 157-184.
- Bo, Zhiyue. (2002). *Chinese Provincial Leaders: Economic Performance and Political Mobility Since 1949*. M. E. Sharpe.
- Bradsher, Keith. (2012, October 26, 2012). China Blocks Web Access to Times After Article. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/26/world/asia/china-blocks-web-access-to-new-york-times.html?hpw>
- Brady, Anne-Marie. (2008). *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2012). Conclusion: the Velvet Fist in the Velvet Glove: Political and Social Control in Contemporary China. In Anne-Marie Brady (Ed.), *China's Thought Management* (pp. 183-205). London and New York: Routledge.
- Brannen, Julia. (2005). Mixing Methods: The Entry of Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches into the Research Process. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 8(3), 173-184.
- Brownlee, Jason. (2007). *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bryman, Alan. (2006). Integrating quantitative and qualitative research: how is it done? *Qualitative Research* 6(1), 97-113.
- Burns, John P. (1989). *The Chinese Communist Party's Nomenklatura System: A Documentary Study of Party Control of Leadership Selection, 1979-1984*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1994). Strengthening central CCP control of leadership selection: the 1990 nomenklatura. *The China Quarterly*, 138, 458-491.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1999). The People's Republic of China at 50: national political reform. *The China Quarterly*, 159, 580-594.
- Callaghan, Karen, & Schnell, Frauke. (2000). Media Frames, Public Attitudes, and Elite Response: An Analysis of Gun Control Issues. *Public Integrity*, 1, 47-74.
- Campbell, Donald T., & Stanley, Julian C. (1963). *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Chan, Alex. (2002). From Propaganda to Hegemony: Jiaodian Fangtan and China's Media Policy. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 11(30), 35-51.
- Chan, Joseph Man, & Lee, Chin-Chuan. (1991). *Mass Media and Political Transition: The Hong Kong press in China's orbit*. New York: Guilford.
- Chan, Joseph Man, & Qiu, Jack Linchuan. (2002). China: Media Liberalization under Authoritarianism. In Monroe E. Price, Beata Rozumilowicz & Stefaan G. Verhulst (Eds.), *Media Reform: Democratizing the media, democratizing the state* (pp. 27-46). London and New York: Routledge.

- Chen, Cheng. (2005). Institutional Legitimacy of an Authoritarian State: China in the Mirror of Eastern Europe. *Problems of Post-Communism* 52(4), 3-13.
- Chen, Long. (2004). News Centered, Supervision by Public Opinion, Humanistic Care: Important Components of Credibility for Life News 新闻本位、舆论监督、人文关怀: 民生新闻的公信力要件. *China Television 中国电视*, 2004(6).
- Chen, Qi, & Han, Juan. (2007). Observations on 'Television Life News' in Xi'an Region" (西安地区电视“民生新闻”观察). *News Knowledge (新闻知识)* 2007(10), 42-44.
- Chen, Xi. (2012). *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*: Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, Xueyi, & Shi, Tianjian. (2001). Media Effects on Political Confidence and Trust in the People's Republic of China in the Post-Tiananmen Period. *East Asia*, 19(3), 84-118.
- China Internet Network Information Center. (2013). *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*. Beijing: China Internet Network Information Center.
- Chu, Chaoxin, & Luo, Ting. (2013). Let the Government Heads Sweat In Front of Camera: The Offensive and Defensive Battle of the Wuhan Asking Politics on Television 让一把手在镜头前流汗 武汉电视问政“攻防战”. *Southern Weekend*. Retrieved from <http://www.infzm.com/content/93608>
- Chung, Jae Ho. (2000). *Central Control and Local Discretion in China: Leadership and Implementation During Post-Mao Decollectivization*: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, Bernard C. . (1963). *The Press and Foreign Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Committee to Protect Journalists. (2012). Vietnam's Press Freedom Shrinks Despite Open Economy.
- Cook, Sarah. (2013). The Long Shadow of Chinese Censorship: How the Communist Party's Media Restrictions Affect News Outlets Around the World.
- Cook, Timothy E. . (1998). *Governing with the News: The News Media As a Political Institution*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- De Burgh, Hugo. (2003). *The Chinese Journalist: Mediating information in the world's most populous country*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- DeMesquita, Bruce Bueno, & Downs, George W. (2005). Development and Democracy. *Foreign Affairs*, 84(5), 77-86.
- Druckman, James N., Green, Donald P., Kuklinski, James H., & Lupia, Arthur (Eds.). (2011). *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Eades, Mark C. (2014). China's Newest Export: Internet Censorship. Retrieved February 26, 2014
- Easton, David. (1965). *A System Analysis of Political Life*. New York: Wiley.
- Eberstadt, Nicholas. (1992). Taiwan and South Korea: The "Democratization" of Outlier States. *World Affairs*, 155(2), 80-89.
- Edin, Maria. (2003a). State Capacity and Local Agent Control in China: CCP Cadre Management from a Township Perspective. *The China Quarterly*, 173, 35-52.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2003b). Remaking the Communist Party-State: The Cadre Responsibility System at the Local Level in China. *China: An International Journal*, 1(1), 1-15.
- Egorov, Georgy, Guriev, Sergei, & Sonin, Konstantin. (2009). Why Resource-poor Dictators Allow Freer Media: A Theory and Evidence from Panel Data. *American Political Science Review*, 103(4), 645-668.

- Eickelman, Dale F., & Anderson, Jon W. (2003). *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*: Indiana University Press.
- Esarey, Ashley. (2005). Cornering the Market: State Strategies for Controlling China's Commercial Media. *Asian Perspective* 29(4), 37-83.
- Farrell, Henry. (2012). The Consequences of the Internet for Politics. *Annual Review of Political Science* 15, 35-52.
- Fox, Elizabeth (Ed.). (1988). *Media and Politics in Latin America: The Struggle for Democracy*: Sage Publications.
- Freedom House. (2013, December 4, 2013). Censors limit coverage of Qingdao pipeline blast. *China Media Bulletin*, 97.
- Fu, Zhengyuan. (1996). *China's Legalists: The Earliest Totalitarians and Their Art of Ruling*: M.E. Sharpe.
- Garnham, Nicholas. (2000). *Emancipation, the Media, and Modernity: Arguments about the Media and Social Theory*: Oxford University Press.
- Geddes, Barbara. (1999). What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years? *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2, 115-144.
- Gerring, John. (2008). Techniques for Case Selection: A Response to David Freedman. *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research: Newsletter of the American Political Science Association Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 6(2), 7-10.
- Gunther, Albert C., Hong, Yah-Huei, & Rodriguez, Lulu. (1994). Balancing Trust in Media and Trust in Government during Political Change in Taiwan. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 71(3), 628-636.
- Gunther, Richard, & Diamond, Larry. (2003). Species of Political Parties. *Party Politics*, 9(2), 167-199.
- Guo, Sujian. (2012). *Chinese Politics and Government: Power, Ideology and Organization*: Routledge.
- Hallin, Daniel C. . (1985). The American News Media: A Critical Theory Perspective. In John Forester (Ed.), *Critical Theory and Public Life* (pp. 121-146). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Hallin, Daniel C., & Mancini, Paolo. (2004). *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*: Cambridge University Press.
- Hassid, Jonathan. (2008). Controlling the Chinese Media: An Uncertain Business. *Asian Survey*, 48(3), 414-430.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2011). Four Models of the Fourth Estate: A Typology of Contemporary Chinese Journalists. *The China Quarterly*, 208, 813-832.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2012). Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs in Chinese Political Life. *Journal of Communication*, 62, 212-230.
- Havel, Vaclav. (1978). The Power of the Powerless. In Vaclav Havel (Ed.), *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965-1990* (pp. 125-214). London: Faber & Faber.
- He, Zhou. (1997). Chinese Communist Party Press in a Tug-of-War. In Chin-Chuan Lee (Ed.), *Power, Money, and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China* (pp. 112-151). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2000). Chinese Communist Party Press in a Tug of War: a political economy analysis of the Shenzhen Special Zone Daily. In Chin-Chuan Lee (Ed.), *Money, Power and Media: communication patterns in cultural China*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.

- He, Zhou, & Chen, Huailin. (1998). *The Chinese Media: a new perspective*. Hong Kong: Pacific Century Press.
- Heilmann, Sebastian. (2005). Regulatory Innovation by Leninist Means: Communist Party Supervision in China's Financial Industry. *The China Quarterly*, 181, 1-21.
- Hicken, Allen. (2006). Party Fabrication: Constitutional Reform and the Rise of Thai Rak Thai. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6(3), 381-407.
- Hildebrandt, Timothy. (2013). *Social Organizations and the Authoritarian State in China*: Cambridge University Press.
- Ho, Samuel P.S., & Lin, George C.S. (2003). Emerging Land Markets in Rural and Urban China: Policies and Practices. *The China Quarterly*, 175, 681-707.
- Howard, Philip N. . (2010). *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*: Oxford University Press.
- Hsing, You-tien. (2006). Global capital and local land in China's urban real estate development. In Fulong Wu (Ed.), *Globalization and the Chinese City* (pp. 167-189). London: Routledge.
- Huang, Shengmin, & Zhou, Yan. (2003). *The Big Change in the Chinese Media Market 中国的媒市场大变局*. Beijing: Zhongxin Publisher.
- Huang, Yuhao. (2008, December 8, 2008). Petitioners Forcibly Sent to Mental Hospitals. *The Beijing News*.
- Huntington, Samuel. (1996). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Hurst, William, & O'Brien, Kevin J. (2002). China's Contentious Petitioners. *The China Quarterly*, 170, 357-359.
- Iyengar, Shanto, & Kinder, Donald R. (1987). *News That Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Iyengar, Shanto, Peters, Mark D., & Kinder, Donald R. (1982). Experimental Demonstrations of the "Not-So-Minimal" Consequences of Television News Programs. *American Political Science Review*, 76(4), 848-858.
- Janowitz, Morris. (1975). Professional Models in Journalism: the Gatekeeper and the Advocate. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 52(4), 618-626.
- Jiang, Zemin. (1992). Report to the Fourteenth Party Congress: Chinese Communist Party.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1997). Report to the Fifteenth Party Congress: Chinese Communist Party.
- Johnson, Janet Buttolph, & Reynolds, H. T. (2012). *Political Science Research Methods 7th Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press.
- Katz, Elihu. (1957). The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-To-Date Report on a Hypothesis. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 21(1), 61-78.
- Katz, Elihu, & Lazarsfeld, Paul Felix. (1955). *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. New York: Free Press.
- Kennedy, John James. (2007). The Implementation of Village Elections and Tax-for-Fee Reform in Rural Northwest China. In Elizabeth J. Perry & Merle Goldman (Eds.), *Grassroots Political Reform in Contemporary China* (pp. 48-74). Harvard University Press.
- King, Gary, Pan, Jennifer, & Roberts, Margaret E. (2013). How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression. *American Political Science Review*, 107(2), 326-343.
- Klapper, Joseph T. (1960). *Effects of Mass Communication*. New York: Free Press.

- Krippendorff, Klaus. (2004). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Krosnick, Jon A., & Kinder, Donald. (1990). Altering the Foundations of Support for the President Through Priming. *American Political Science Review*, 84(2), 497-512.
- Kruskal, William H., & Wallis, W. Allen. (1952). Use of Ranks in One-Criterion Variance Analysis. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 47(260), 583-621.
- Kuo, Peter. (1993). Taiwan's News Media: Its Role in Democratization. *World Affairs*, 155(3), 109-116.
- Lasswell, Harold Dwight. (1930). *Psychopathology and Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1935). *World Politics and Personal Insecurity*. New York: Free Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1938). *Propaganda Technique in the World War*. New York: P. Smith.
- Lawrence, Susan V., & Martin, Michael F. (2013). *Understanding China's Political System*: Congressional Research Service.
- Lawson, Chappell H. . (2002). *Building the Fourth Estate: Democratization and the Rise of a Free Press in Mexico*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Lawson, Chappell, & McCann, James A. (2005). Television News, Mexico's 2000 Elections and Media Effects in Emerging Democracies. *British Journal of Political Science*, 35(1), 1-30.
- Lazarsfeld, Paul Felix, Berelson, Bernard, & Gaudet, Hazel. (1948). *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lee, Chin-Chuan (Ed.). (1990). *Voices of China: The Interplay of Politics and Journalism*: The Guilford Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (Ed.). (1994). *China's Media, Media's China*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (Ed.). (2000). *Power, Money and Media: communication patterns in cultural China*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.
- Leeson, Peter T. . (2008). Media Freedom, Political Knowledge, and Participation. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 22(2), 155-169.
- Lenin, Vladimir. (1963-70). *Collected Works, 47 Volumes*. Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House.
- Lerner, Daniel. (1964). *The Passing of Traditional Societies*. New York: Free Press.
- Lerner, Daniel , & Schramm, Wilbur L. (Eds.). (1967). *Communication and Change in the Developing Countries*. Honolulu, HI: East-West Center Press.
- Levendusky, Matthew. (2013). *How Partisan Media Polarize America*: University of Chicago Press.
- Levin, Irwin P. (1999). *Relating Statistics And Experimental Design: An Introduction*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Li, Cheng. (2001). *China's Leaders: The New Generation*: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Li, Cheng, & Bachman, David. (1989). Localism, Elitism, and Immobilism: Elite Formation and Social Change in Post-Mao China. *World Politics*, 42(1), 64-94.
- Li, Lianjiang. (2004). Political Trust in Rural China. *Modern China*, 30(2), 228-258.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2008). Political Trust and Petitioning in the Chinese Countryside. *Comparative Politics*, 40(2), 209-226.
- Lin, Fen. (2010). A Survey Report on Chinese Journalists in China. *China Quarterly*, 202, 421-434.



- Lin, George C. S., & Ho, Samuel P. S. (2005). The state, land system, and land development processes in contemporary China. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95(2), 411-436.
- Linz, Juan. (1975). Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes. In Fred I. Greenstein & Nelson W. Polsby (Eds.), *Handbook of Political Science, Vol. 3, Macropolitical Theory*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.
- Lipset, Seymour M. . (1959). Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy. *American Political Science Review* 53(1), 69-105.
- Liu, Alan P. L. (1971). *Communications and National Integration in Communist China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Liu, Hongming, Xu, Su, & Li, Hong. (2007). Understanding 'Television Life News' Phenomenon ("电视民生新闻"的现象解析). *Film and Literature (电影文学)* 2007(12), 93-94.
- Lo, Ven-hwei, Neilan, Edward, & King, Pu-tsung. (1998). Television coverage of the 1995 legislative election in Taiwan: Rise of cable television as a force for balance in media coverage. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 42(3), 340-355.
- Lorentzen, Peter. (2010). Regularizing Rioting: Permitting Protest in an Authoritarian Regime. *Working paper*.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2012). Strategic censorship. *Working paper*.
- Lorentzen, Peter, Landry, Pierre, & Yasuda, John. (2014). Undermining Authoritarian Innovation: The Power of China's Industrial Giants. *The Journal of Politics*, 76(1), 182-194.
- Luo, Yousheng, & Sun, Youhai (Eds.). (1993). *Explanation of the PRC Agricultural Law (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo nongyefa shiyi)*. Qinhuangdao: Zhongguo zhengfa daxue chubanshe.
- MacKuen, Michael Bruce. (1981). Social communication and the mass policy agenda. In Michael Bruce MacKuen & Steven Lane Coombs (Eds.), *More than news: Media power in public affairs* (pp. 34-70). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Manion, Melanie. (2004). *Corruption by Design: Building Clean Government in Mainland China and Hong Kong*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McCombs, Maxwell E. (1981). The agenda-setting approach. In Dan D. Nimmo & Keith R. Sanders (Eds.), *Handbook of Political Communication* (pp. 75-110). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- McCombs, Maxwell E., & Shaw, Donald L. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187.
- McCubbins, Mathew D., & Schwartz, Thomas. (1984). Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols versus Fire Alarms. *American Journal of Political Science*, 28(1), 165-179.
- McDonnell, Justin. (2013, December 5, 2013). Chinese Censorship Inhibits Relations with Japan. *The Diplomat*.
- Mesquita, Bruce Bueno de, Smith, Alastair, Siverson, Randolph M., & Morrow, James D. (2003). *The Logic of Political Survival*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Miao, Di. (2011). Between Propaganda and Commercials: Chinese Television Today. In Susan Shirk (Ed.), *Changing Media, Changing China* (pp. 91-114): Oxford University Press.
- Miao, Ye. (2003). Violence Leads to High Profits in the Real Estate Industry. *Shanghai Youth Daily*.

- Millard, Frances. (1998). Democratization and the Media in Poland, 1989-97. In Vicky Randall (Ed.), *Democratization and the Media* (pp. 85-105). London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers.
- Miller, Nicholas. (2011). The Case for Li Yuanchao. *The Diplomat*.
- Muller, Edward N., & Jukam, Thomas O. (1977). On the Meaning of Political Support. *American Political Science Review* 71(4), 1561-1595.
- Nathan, Andrew J. . (2003). Authoritarian Resilience. *Journal of Democracy* 14(1), 6-17.
- National Science Foundation. (2005). Qualitative Research Design and Methods: Strengths, and Shared and Unique Standards. *Workshop on Interdisciplinary Standards for Systematic Qualitative Research*, 10-12.
- Nelson, Daniel N. (Ed.). (1980). *Local Politics in Communist Countries*: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Nelson, Thomas E., Clawson, Rosalee A., & Oxley, Zoe M. (1997). Media Framing of a Civil Liberties Conflict and Its Effect on Tolerance. *American Political Science Review*, 91(3), 567-583.
- Neuman, Russell W. (1991). *The Future of the Mass Audience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Neuman, W. Russell, & Guggenheim, Lauren. (2011). The Evolution of Media Effects Theory: A Six-Stage Model of Cumulative Research. *Communication Theory*, 21, 169-196.
- Ng, Jason Q. (2013). *Blocked on Weibo: What Gets Suppressed on China's Version of Twitter (and Why)*: The New Press.
- Norris, Pippa, & Inglehart, Ronald. (2009). *Cosmopolitan Communications: Cultural Diversity in a Globalized World*: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Brien, Kevin J., & Li, Lianjiang. (1999). Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China. *Comparative Politics*, 31(2), 167-186.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2006). *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Brien, Kevin. (1996). Rightful Resistance. *World Politics* 49, 31-56.
- Pan, Zhongdang, & Chan, Joseph M. (2003). Shifting Journalistic Paradigms : How China's Journalists Assess "Media Exemplars". *Communication Research*, 30(6), 649-682.
- Pei, Minxin. (2006). *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Perry, Elizabeth J. (1994). Trends in the Study of Chinese Politics: State-Society Relations. *The China Quarterly*, 139, 704-713.
- Price, Monroe E., Rozumilowicz, Beata, & Verhulst, Stefaan G. (Eds.). (2002). *Media Reform: Democratizing the Media, Democratizing the State*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pu, Xingzu. (1995). *The Political System of the People's Republic of China (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhengzhi zhidu)*. Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian.
- Pye, Lucian W. (Ed.). (1963). *Communications and Political Development*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Randall, Vicky. (1993). The Media and Democratisation in the Third World. *Third World Quarterly*, 14(3), 625-646.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1998). Introduction. In Vicky Randall (Ed.), *Democratization and the Media* (pp. 1-5). London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers.
- Rawnsley, Gary D., & Rawnsley, Ming-Yeh T. (1998b). Regime Transition and the Media in Taiwan. In Vicky Randall (Ed.), *Democratization and the Media* (pp. 106-124). London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers.

- \_\_\_\_\_. (Eds.). (1998a). *Political Communications in Greater China: The Construction and Reflection of Identity*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rozumilowicz, Beata. (2002). Democratic Change: A Theoretical Perspective. In Monroe E. Price, Beata Rozumilowicz & Stefaan G. Verhulst (Eds.), *Media Reform: Democratizing the media, democratizing the state* (pp. 9-26). London and New York: Routledge.
- Saich, Tony. (2007). Citizen's Perceptions of Governance in Rural and Urban China. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 12(1), 1-28.
- Schudson, Michael. (1998). The public journalism movement and its problems. In Doris Graber, Denis McQuail & Pippa Norris (Eds.), *The Politics of News, the News of Politics* (pp. 132-149). Washington, DC: CQ Press.
- Scott, James. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Shirk, Susan L. (2011). Changing Media, Changing China. In Susan L. Shirk (Ed.), *Changing Media, Changing China* (pp. 1-37): Oxford University Press.
- Siebert, Fred, Peterson, Theodore, & Schramm, Wilbur (1956). *Four Theories of the Press*: University of Illinois Press.
- Skidmore, Thomas E. (Ed.). (1993). *Television, Politics, and the Transition to Democracy in Latin America*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Slater, Dan. (2003). Iron Cage in an Iron Fist: Authoritarian Institutions and the Personalization of Power in Malaysia. *Comparative Politics* 36(1), 81-101.
- Sparrow, Bartholomew H. (1999). *Uncertain guardians: The news media as a political institution*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Spurrier, John D. (2003). On the null distribution of the Kruskal–Wallis statistic. *Journal of Nonparametric Statistics*, 15(6), 685-691.
- Stern, Rachel E., & Hassid, Jonathan. (2012). Amplifying Silence: Uncertainty and Control Parables in Contemporary China. *Comparative Political Studies*, 45(10), 1230-1254.
- Stockmann, Daniela. (2011). Greasing the Reels: Advertising as a Means of Campaigning on Chinese Television. *The China Quarterly* 208, 851-869.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2013). *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*: Cambridge University Press.
- Stockmann, Daniela, & Gallagher, Mary E. (2011). Remote Control: How the Media Sustains Authoritarian Rule in China. *Comparative Political Studies*, 44(4), 436-467.
- Stokes, Susan. (2005). Perverse Accountability: A Formal Model of Machine Politics with Evidence from Argentina. *American Political Science Review*, 99(3), 215-225.
- Sun, Yan. (2004). *Corruption and Market in Contemporary China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Tang, Wenfang, & Iyengar, Shanto (Eds.). (2012). *Political Communication in China: Convergence or Divergence Between the Media and Political System?*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Teorell, Jan. (2010). *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972-2006*: Cambridge University Press.
- Terkildsen, Nayda, & Schnell, Frauke. (1997). How Media Frames Move Public Opinion: An Analysis of the Women's Movement. *Political Research Quarterly*, 50(4), 879-900.
- The Economist. (2006, October 12, 2006). Obituary: Anna Politkovskaya. *The Economist*.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2009, February 5, 2009). Obituary: Anastasia Baburova. *The Economist*.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2012, October 27, 2012). China's New Leadership: Vaunting the best, fearing the worst. *The Economist*

- Tong, Jingrong. (2007). Guerrilla tactics of investigative journalists in China. *Journalism*, 8(5), 530-535.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2010). The crisis of the centralized media control theory: how local power controls media in China. *Media, Culture & Society* 32(6), 925-942.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2011). *Investigative Journalism in China: Journalism, Power, and Society*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Triska, Jan F. (1980). Introduction: Local Communist Politics: An Overview. In Daniel N. Nelson (Ed.), *Local Politics in Communist Countries* (pp. 1-18): The University Press of Kentucky.
- Tsai, Lily L. . (2007). *Accountability Without Democracy: Solidary Groups and Public Goods provision in Rural China*: Cambridge University Press.
- Volland, Nicolai. (2012). From Control to Management: The CCP's 'Reforms of the Cultural Structure'. In Anne-Marie Brady (Ed.), *China's Thought Management* (pp. 107-121). London and New York: Routledge.
- Walder, Andrew. (1994). The Decline of Communist Power: Elements of a Theory of Institutional Change. *Theory and Society*, 23, 297-323.
- Wang, Chia-Chou. (2013). Political Interest Distribution and Provincial Response Strategies: Central-Local Relations in China after the 17th National Congress of the CPC. *China: An International Journal*, 11(1), 21-39.
- Wang, Ruosi. (2011). On the Current State of 'Life News' and Its Future Development (民生新闻现状与出路的思考). *Today's Mass Media (今传媒)* 2011(8), 127-128.
- Wedeman, Andrew. (2001). Incompetence, Noise, and Fear in Central-Local Relations in China *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 35(4), 59-83.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2012). *Double Paradox: Rapid Growth and Rising Corruption in China*: Cornell University Press.
- Wei, Ran, & Leung, Louis. (1998). A Cross-Societal Study on the Role of the Mass Media in Political Socialization in China and Taiwan. *International Communication Gazette*, 60(5), 377-393.
- White, Stephen, Oates, Sarah , & McAllister, Ian. (2005). Media Effects and Russian Elections, 1999-2000. *British Journal of Political Science* 35, 191-208.
- Wilson, Ken. (1993). Thinking about the ethics of fieldwork. In Stephen Devereux & John Hoddinott (Eds.), *Fieldwork in Developing Countries* (pp. 179-199): Lynne Rienner.
- Xiang, Jiaming, & Zhou, Xifeng. (2013, November 26, 2011). Hunan Chenzhou Launched "Asking Politics on Television," Ratings Climb and Hotline Calls Increase 湖南郴州推出“电视问政”收视率攀升电话爆料大增. *Xiaoxiang Morning News 潇湘晨报*. Retrieved from [http://hunan.ifeng.com/news/fghx/detail\\_2013\\_11/26/1508125\\_0.shtml](http://hunan.ifeng.com/news/fghx/detail_2013_11/26/1508125_0.shtml)
- Xie, Yungeng, & Zhou, Hongfeng. (2005). Report on Competitions of Chinese TV News Programs (中国电视新闻竞争报告). *World of Sight and Sound (视听界)* 2005(1), 4-14.
- Xinhua News Agency. (2013). State Bureau for Letters and Calls: Land Acquisition, Demolition, and Social Insurance are Important Problems. Retrieved from [http://news.xinhuanet.com/house/sz/2013-11-29/c\\_118341356.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/house/sz/2013-11-29/c_118341356.htm)
- Xu, Jiang. (2001). The changing role of land-use planning in the land-development process in Chinese cities: the case of Guangzhou. *Third World Planning Review*, 23(3), 229-248.

- Xu, Jiang, Yeh, Anthony, & Wu, Fulong. (2009). Land Commodification: New Land Development and Politics in China since the Late 1990s. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 33(4), 890-913.
- Xu, Jie. (2013). Trust in Chinese State Media: The influence of education, Internet, and government. *Journal of International Communication*, 19(1), 69-84.
- Yang, Guobin. (2009). *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*: Columbia University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2010). Brokering Environment and Health in China: issue entrepreneurs of the public sphere. *Journal of Contemporary China* 19(63), 101-118.
- Yeh, Anthony Gar-On, & Wu, Fulong. (1996). The New Land Development Process and Urban Development in Chinese Cities. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 20(2), 330-353.
- Yu, Frederick T. C. (1964). *Mass Persuasion in China*. New York: Praeger.
- Zakaria, Fareed. (1997). The Rise of Illiberal Democracy. *Foreign Affairs*, 76(6), 22-43.
- Zhan, Jiang. (2007). Introduction: Supervision by Public Opinion and Political Civilization. In Jiang Zhan & Jinxi Zhang (Eds.), *Watchdog Journalism and Global Democracy* (新闻舆论监督与全球政治文明) (pp. 1-50). Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Zhang, Li. (2004). Forced From Home: Property Rights, Civic Activism, And The Politics Of Relocation In China. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 33(2-4), 247-281.
- Zhao, Ling. (2003, September 4, 2003). Tragedies and Comedies of Demolition and Relocation in Ten Years. *Southern Weekend*. Retrieved from <http://www.southcn.com/weekend/commend/200309040001.htm>
- Zhao, Yuezhi. (1998). *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*: University of Illinois Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2000). Watchdogs on Party Leashes? Contexts and Limitations of Investigative Reporting in Post-Deng China. *Journalism Studies*, 1(4), 577-597.
- Zhao, Yuezhi, & Guo, Zhenzhi. (2005). Television in China: History, Political Economy, and Ideology. In Janet Wasko (Ed.), *A Companion to Television* (pp. 521-539): Blackwell Publishing.
- Zhao, Ziyang. (1987). Report on the Thirteenth Party Congress: Chinese Communist Party.
- Zheng, Yongnian. (2006). Explaining the Sources of de facto Federalism in Reform China: Intergovernmental Decentralization, Globalization, and Central–Local Relations. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 7(2), 101–126.
- Zhou, Yuezhi. (2000). Watchdogs on Party Leashes? Contexts and implications of investigative journalism in post-Deng China. *Journalism Studies* 1, 577-597.
- Zhou, Yuqiong, & Moy, Patricia. (2007). Parsing Framing Processes: The Interplay Between Online Public Opinion and Media Coverage. *Journal of Communication*, 57(1), 79-98.
- Zhu, Jieming. (2002). Urban Development under Ambiguous Property Rights: A Case of China's Transition Economy. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 26(1), 41-57.
- Zhu, Shoutong. (2005). On the Possibility of a Television ‘Life News’ Theory (论电视民生新闻理论的可能性). *China Television* (中国电视) 2005(12), 15-20.
- Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation. (2013). Zanu PF team off to China. Retrieved from [http://www.zbc.co.zw/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=39251:zanu-pf-team-off-to-china&catid=41:top-stories&Itemid=86](http://www.zbc.co.zw/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=39251:zanu-pf-team-off-to-china&catid=41:top-stories&Itemid=86)